



Child's Dream of Becoming Veterinarian Lives on Through Ben's Fund

By Heather Grimshaw

Ben Cote was more than a boy who loved animals. During his short life, he worked to improve the lives of animals large and small, and that legacy lives on.

[Rhabdomyosarcoma](#), a rare cancer that forms in the striated muscle, cut Ben's life short, but his memory is ever present, thanks, in part, to a Morris Animal Foundation (MAF) fund

established in his name. [Ben's Fund](#), established by Ben's parents, Steve and Megan Cote, helps fund MAF's [Veterinary Student Scholars](#) program. The unique program enables veterinary students to pursue research interests and, by extension, improve the lives of pets as well as horses and wildlife.



"Initially we looked at donating money to cancer research, but we knew that Ben would have wanted to support research across a wide range of animal species," said Steve. "He liked all animals, and the [Veterinary Student Scholars](#) program touches everything from cats and dogs to elephants," he added. "Ben's legacy is really about helping all animals."

Though he only lived eight years, Ben made strides toward his goal of becoming a veterinarian. He scrubbed in with a local animal doctor to assist with a cat's surgery. He volunteered at the Wayside Waifs shelter in Kansas City, where his family adopted their dog, Polly, and raised \$10,000 for its "Strut with Your Mutt" fundraiser. Ben also took up horseback riding, and after a few lessons, his instructor noticed a rare connection between Ben and the horse, evidenced by the number of hours Ben spent grooming his new friend, Pretzel, so the instructor gave the horse to Ben.

"When Ben got sick, friends came out of the woodwork," said Steve. "There's nothing you could do, yet everybody wanted to do something."

In 2008, a few months after Ben died, the Cotes sought a way to celebrate his life. As Ben's birthday—January 18—approached, they distributed blank art canvasses and asked family and friends to express their memories through art.

"There were no rules," Steve recalled. "We told them to paint whatever they wanted that reminded them of Ben."

The resulting artwork—brightly colored animals, baseball fields and sunsets of varying hues—were displayed at a local gallery on Ben's birthday. Pizza was served, balloons dotted the air and artists of all ages recounted happy memories of their young friend.

"It wasn't a sad thing," Steve said. "It was good for the kids to have a way to express their grief through art. We were all grieving at that point, but it wasn't a big cry fest. It was actually very uplifting for everyone."

As people saw the artwork—at the party and later at a local salon—requests to purchase the whimsical pieces mounted. To answer demand for the emotional keepsakes, Ben's sister, Grace (now 8 years old), and their mother, Megan, suggested turning the art into note cards. Proceeds from the cards, which are packaged in sets, help fund MAF's Veterinary Student Scholars program and can be purchased online at www.Bensfund.org.

One piece of art that depicts a great horned owl was painted by Ben as a craft project and discovered weeks after the initial art display.

In addition to the emotional impact of finding Ben's art, there is a special family connection with owls. "A pair of great horned owls was heard hooting outside Ben's window in the early morning before he passed," Steve recalled.

"It was quite significant for us to find this painting," he added. "Ben himself is part of this collection."

As Ben's birthday approaches on Sunday, the Cotes plan to circulate canvasses once again to classmates, family members and friends, asking them to paint animals that remind them of Ben. It has now become an annual event. The act of remembering Ben is not only important to his parents and sister but also has a special significance for the children whom he knew, Steve said.

"It is empowering for them," he explained. "They feel like they are part of a bigger thing."