

Area vets care for Mr. Popper's penguins

by Dana Taddeo, Chronicle Contributor | Posted: Thursday, June 16, 2011 12:00 pm

Veterinarians Dr. John Charos and Dr. Laura Gorman have the rare privilege of saying they have worked with the stars of a new summer movie.

Charos and Gorman, along with another vet from Central Veterinary Associates — a 24-hour animal hospital that has locations in Forest Hills, Bayside and Far Rockaway, but is based in Valley Stream, LI — cared for the eight penguins, used in the filming of Jim Carrey's new movie "Mr. Popper's Penguins."

Although the feathered stars came to New York from Montreal with a veterinarian, once the birds were on set, producers of the film wanted an experienced avian vet, according to Charos.

They researched and "Googled until they found me," Charos said.

During the five-month shoot at Steiner Studios in Brooklyn, Charos, the director of avian and exotics medicine at CVA, and Gorman, an associate veterinarian, were responsible for the overall health and well-being of Carrey's smallest co-stars.

To ensure the birds stayed stress-free, they lived in a celebrity-worthy refrigerated environment equipped with a custom-made cold water jacuzzi.

"The studio and production were amazing at budgeting because they built the penguins their own facility," Charos said.

The vets also had to help the penguins, which were raised in fresh water in a Canadian zoo, transition into their new salt-water environment.

Charos, who specializes in small and exotic animals, said this was done by introducing small amounts of saltwater into the movie star birds' diets, which activates unused glands that are necessary for the birds to live without a freshwater source.

Throughout his 23-year career in New York, Charos has never worked with any type of movie star animals and was intrigued with what went into making the film.

"It was interesting to see how the sets were built and how they trained these 'actors,'" he said.

While a rewarding experience for Charos, he faced a challenge when trying to complete a daily test on the powerful animals.

"They are kind of like chickens in tuxedos. Their whole bodies are protected by dense feathers,"

Charos said. "Taking blood from a penguin is not an easy task."

After filming was over, the penguins were brought to another facility built especially for them in Hong Kong, but Charos' and Gorman's work was still not done.

Before they were relocated, the doctors checked the penguins for West Nile virus and avian flu to ensure they would remain healthy.

The birds will stay in Hong Kong until a new custom-built home is completed for them in China.

"Mr. Popper's Penguins" opens nation-wide on Friday.