

Business

City's First Black-Owned Veterinary Opens **Paws, Purrs, & Exotics Makes Alexandria History**

By Mia Fields-Hall
 Special to the AFRO

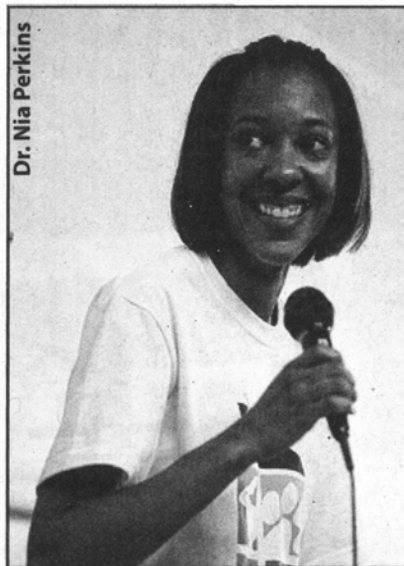
"It's surreal that this is all happening," said Dr. Nia Perkins when asked how she felt about having the first Black-owned veterinary business in Alexandria, Va., and one of the few in the metropolitan area. "This is all such a humbling experience."

Perkins and her business partner Dr. Elton Vyfhuis opened Paws, Purrs, & Exotics Animal Hospital, a full-service company catering to the health and grooming needs of various animals, this week. "I've always had a love for animals," Perkins said, "Ever since I was a little girl I've just always had to be around them."

Dr. Elton Vyfhuis, a District native whose lifelong love for animals grew after an aunt gave him a chow puppy as a child, owned a vast array of pets, from cats and dogs to a chicken and snakes. "It's always been a desire of mine to help animals, it started at the age of seven and grew from there."

Perkins, a Chicago native, received her bachelor's degree from Xavier University in New Orleans and graduated from Tuskegee University School of Veterinary Medicine in 2002. The future business partners met at Tuskegee and found they shared a common vision---owning a hospital for animals. "We had both been out of school for awhile and had worked at various veterinary hospitals throughout the area, we just felt it was time to have our own," Dr. Perkins said.

They approached Perkins' uncle, who helped them form an LLC and structure a winning business plan. They also applied to a variety of programs and were accepted into a special



Dr. Nia Perkins

veterinary funding initiative offered by Bank of America. "Receiving funding wasn't as hard as everyone might think, it was actually pretty easy," said Perkins. "It's definitely a challenge to get everything in order, but we're a team so that makes it all fall in place."

After a two-year process, the duo opened the animal hospital on Aug. 10.

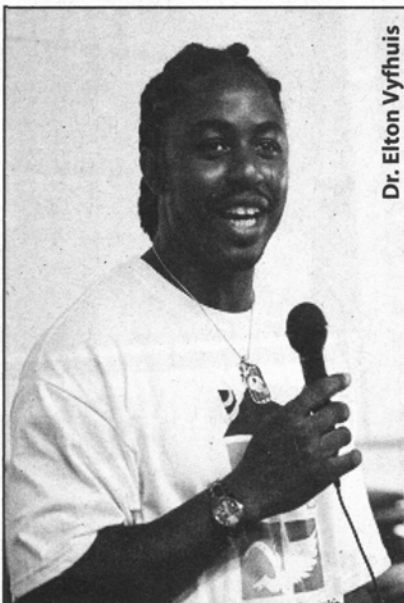
While Perkins and Vyfhuis have successfully prepared for Paws, Purrs, & Exotics' opening, a void still exists in the veterinary field for Blacks. Lisa Greenhill, associate executive director of the Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges, said in an interview with the *Washington Times* that Black enrollment at vet schools is "very low," with African-American students accounting for about 2.5 percent of the 2009 graduating class. "Our research indicates that Blacks have different relationships with animals than Whites and don't take their pets to the vet as much, so Black kids don't get exposed to veterinary medicine as a career," said Greenhill.

Defying the statistical odds, Perkins and Vyfhuis say their services, not just their race, make the company one-of-a-kind.

"I believe our exotic services really make us stand out," Vyfhuis said. "Bring your mice, snake, hamsters and reptiles to us, but not the fish."

Paws, Purrs, & Exotics will offer services in wellness examinations, vaccinations, DNA testing, professional grooming, dietary recommendations, house calls, pet taxi's and much more.

"We're just happy to be here," Perkins said. "And even happier to make a positive impact on our community."



Dr. Elton Vyfhuis

Paws, Purrs, & Exotics is located at 133 South Peyton St. in Alexandria. For more information visit www.pawspurrsandexotics.com