When Dr Jaipal Singh Gill was around seven or eight years old, his pet rabbit fell sick. “It had diarrhoea. I remember putting it in the pet cage and walking to the vet’s clinic just down the road from our home,” he recalls. “The vet gave my rabbit an injection, so I thought, he’s going to be fine. But he died on the way home. Yes, I cried.” This deep love for animals was perhaps matched only by his passion for learning. At age six, he had a book titled I Want To Be A Vet by Dan Liebman, which he read “a hundred times”, and it ultimately turned out to be a foreshadowing of things to come. A qualified veterinarian, Dr Gill, 34, who has been Executive Director of SPCA Singapore for two years, shares his journey with The AlumNUS.

Why did you study Science at NUS?
When I was young: I had a plan, then I didn’t, then I had a plan again. I wanted to be a vet when I was six, then I grew up and had thoughts of doing other things. In junior college, I broke records for the worst results ever — I had straight Fs! I had been causing trouble the whole year, and failed my promotional exams. It was a wake-up call. The school management said, “Show us you can do it. You have two weeks to prepare to re-sit your papers.” I did decently for my retake, and they didn’t retain me. I did okay for my ‘A’ Levels. At that point,
I looked at vet schools overseas, and found that it was a very expensive course. So, I ended up doing Life Sciences, which is about how life works — I love learning about that!

You were already active in animal welfare when in NUS. Tell us about that.
Even before entering NUS, I did outreach work in raising awareness on the conditions of factory-farmed animals. In NUS, I wanted to join an animal welfare group but there wasn’t any, so I decided to start one. I advertised in the IVLE (Integrated Virtual Learning Environment) boards, and the response was great! We started the NUS Animal Welfare group in 2005 with 15 students from everywhere — Law, Science, Social Sciences. The diversity of knowledge elevated our discussions. We’d meet at the Central Library and do volunteer work at animal shelters. We started holding small events and this built up to something bigger — such as the National Animal Welfare Symposium which finally took place in 2008, and brought all the major animal welfare bodies together. The group is now called NUS PEACE (People Ending Animal Cruelty and Exploitation).

How has Singapore’s animal welfare scene changed in the last 10 years?
There are more welfare groups and events now. There have also been legislative changes to the Animals and Birds Act enforcing stricter measures on animal abusers and animal-related businesses as well as age restrictions (16 or older) on pet ownership. At SPCA, we are working towards a policy of zero euthanasia of healthy and treatable animals. But for there to be fewer animals to put down, we need to sterilise. Since 1991, SPCA has offered free sterilisation vouchers for street dogs and cats — over $1m has been spent on this programme. You notice there are far fewer stray cats and kittens than 20 years ago.

How can we improve the state of animal welfare?
There are many groups we need to reach out to. People who abandon pets for different reasons. People who lack basic knowledge about caring for their pets’ welfare. There was an owner who kept rabbits in a cage outside his HDB flat. When I went there, I saw a cage filled with rabbits, without an inch of spare space. The owner thought since there was so little room the rabbits would have no way to mate. But right in front of us, as he was talking, two rabbits were mating! He had one male and one female rabbit a year ago and now there were about 100! So, what are the solutions? First, education of pet owners about sterilisation. Second, support for pet owners, especially those from low-income brackets. Next is legislative change, and some progress has been made in this area since 2011.

What moves would you want to see in place for pet shops and breeders?
The local pet industry should do more to help with pet overpopulation. They can do this by reducing the number of animals bred and by placing in their shops rescued animals for adoption. The latter is something that has been done in other countries. The number of animals bred for sale needs to be restricted and conditions in breeding farms improved.

What was NUS student life like?
I found that getting a general degree was really useful. NUS Science GEM (General Education Module) lets you read many other modules than just your core subjects. I did Economics, Psychology, Human Development, Geo-politics, Modes of Invention, Film and History…. I’m thankful I didn’t do veterinary science as my first degree, because as an undergrad I’d have only read in that area. Having been a Science student all through pre-university days, it made me a little rigid. NUS chipped that away quite a bit! Learning from different fields has prepared me for my current job.

Anything that left a deep impression?
I remember my professor from Evolutionary Biology — it was a subject that invited disagreement. This professor said, “Whatever I teach you, don’t believe what I say. I could be wrong. Go out and find out for yourself.” That to me was an important lesson, to not subscribe to an argument from authority, but to look at things critically. This encouraged me to look for exposure to areas outside Science.

How involved are you with NUS now?
I just did a talk at NUS on careers in NGOs. I was also at the Science Open House in 2017, where alumni meet and talk to prospective students. Earlier that year I worked with a Yale-NUS welfare group researching animal testing. I’m also involved in animal welfare research, and one of the researchers I work with is my wife who is doing her thesis — she is in Communications and New Media, focusing on health communications. We’ve completed one study and a white paper on that will be out soon, and we’re now working on two other research areas.

SPCA — FUR REAL

DR GILL LISTS THE TOP THREE MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT HIS ORGANISATION

1. That we are a place for people to give up their pets
The SPCA should not be the first choice when someone wants to give up their pet. A pet is for life, but in the event a pet owner is unable to look after the pet, it is their responsibility to find a home for the animal.

2. That we are government-funded
We are a registered animal welfare charity and we rely on donations from the public to keep our services going.

3. That we are a government body
The SPCA is not a government agency.