When Andy Baker, DVM, co-owner of Nolana Animal Hospital in McAllen, isn't practicing veterinary medicine, he's golfing, marlin fishing, spending time with his children and grandchildren or flying his personal airplane from The Valley to San Antonio, Houston or Austin. While Dr. Baker's passions are varied, his professional interest as an orthopedic surgeon is singular, earning him the 2016 TVMA Medical Specialty Practitioner of the Year Award.

While specialty medicine is a common practice nowadays, it wasn't in the early 1970s, when Dr. Baker began his career. General practitioners initially were hesitant to refer pet owners to specialists in fear they would lose their clientele, but a shift toward specialty medicine was soon on the rise, coinciding with Dr. Baker's training in orthopedic surgery. He earned his Doctor of Veterinary Medicine at Oklahoma State University in 1966, where he gained first-hand experience performing surgery.

"My professor was right there," Dr. Baker said. "He scrubbed in with me, and he would do some of it. That's how the training was-you got in and you did it, even in large animals."

This exposure sparked his passion for surgery. After completing veterinary school, he served in the U.S. Air Force for two years as a base veterinarian and public health officer. He obtained his pilot's license while stationed at Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Alabama, and also spent time at the veterinary schools at Auburn University and Tuskegee University. After his military service, Dr. Baker flew his airplane to College Station for an interview for a two-year residency at the Texas A&M University College of Veterinary Medicine. He gained admittance into the first veterinary surgery internship at A&M and learned from some of the most well-reputed surgeons in the field: Drs. Phil Hobson, Don Pernmatti, Don Howard, Mike Herron, Don Hulse and Dean Gage.

"Dr. Baker's first position out of his residency program was as a staff surgeon at a four-doctor practice in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, where his work entailed general surgery and soft tissue and orthopedic surgeries. Preferring to be closer to family, Dr. Baker, his wife and three children moved in 1972 to Houston, where Dr. Baker worked for Town and Country Animal Hospital and began receiving referrals. No one in Houston was performing surgeries at that time, and before Dr. Baker's arrival, many practitioners were sending cases to A&M. As specialty medicine started to gain traction in the mid-1970s, a group of surgeons asked Dr. Baker to join Veterinary Associates, a specialty practice in ophthalmology, surgery, internal medicine and radiology. This marked a turning point in Dr. Baker's career.

"There was nobody in Houston doing this," Dr. Baker said. "None of us knew if we could make a living doing this. It was a little scary until I realized this is what I wanted to do."

The clinic was the first of Dr. Baker's groundbreaking steps in specialty medicine. He and his fellow A&M alum, Elliott Craig, DVM, were the first surgeons in the state to perform hip replacement surgeries.

"We started doing it just for the fun of it, and it was something that wasn't being done," Dr. Baker said. "He thought we wouldn't do very many because of the cost of them. We ended up doing close to 800 of them before Dr. Craig died."

Dr. Baker pushed the specialty referral movement forward in the late 1970s by conducting surgeries beyond Houston with the help of the Flying Veterinarian Association, which he and Bob Norton, DVM, co-founded.

"There was a group of veterinarians who liked aviation who had their own planes," Dr. Baker said. "We tried to see if we could integrate aviation into veterinary medicine. We would have meetings and fly-ins, where veterinarians came from across the country."

A requirement of the association was to offer continuing education credit to veterinary peers at their fly-ins. Their first meeting was at Moore Air Base in McAllen. Dr. Baker gave a presentation on specialty medicine and left a significant impression on Steve Bentsen, DVM, who asked Dr. Baker if he would like to conduct knee and other surgical procedures in The Valley once a month.

"Andy and I just hit it off immediately,
so I approached him about this idea and he said, "Sure, let's try it!" Dr. Bentsen said. "When he started coming down here, this was a brand new thing. The idea of the advanced surgery that Andy does was truly foreign. He really came to the frontier. He was one of the first that brought us the possibility of being able to refer specialty work."

Dr. Bentsen pointed out that it wasn't easy for Dr. Baker to convince area practitioners to refer clients to him, but Dr. Baker's experience in Houston, his humble disposition and his plainspoken manner appealed to both pet owners and other veterinarians.

"He not only has to build relationships with clients in a way that they trust him and believe in him but he has to be able to relate to the other doctors," Dr. Bentsen said. "Andy is just a down-to-earth guy. People like him."

For 11 years, Dr. Baker regularly flew from Houston to McAllen, handling an array of orthopedic surgery cases.

"My technician and I would load up all of our surgery equipment, power drill, saws and everything," Dr. Baker said. "We'd get in the airplane, do surgery all day and be home that evening."

Dr. Baker's referrals grew so much that he eventually packed up his life in Houston and moved to McAllen, becoming a partner in Dr. Bentsen's Nolana Animal Hospital. He admits that it was the best business and personal decision he ever made.

"I have just fallen in love," Dr. Baker said. "For me, it fits. It's been a great environment for me. I love every minute of it. I still enjoy coming to work on Mondays. I want to keep doing it as long as I can."

Dr. Baker has such a positive reputation across the state that veterinarians from Corpus Christi, Laredo, San Antonio, San Marcos and Monterrey, Mexico, refer their clients to him. Even though he's based in McAllen, he continues to fly and perform surgeries in other cities.

"There is a vibrant network of quality practices that refer freely among themselves to take advantage of strengths and specialists of various doctors," Dr. Bentsen said. "This is largely due to the influence of one trail-blazing veterinarian who came to The Valley more than 30 years ago and changed veterinary medicine for all of us."

David Hellin, DVM, co-owner of Mission Veterinary Hospital in Mission, Texas, has known Dr. Baker for about 20 years. He is just one of many who has recommended Dr. Baker's services to pet owners. He deeply appreciates Dr. Baker's willingness to help at any time of day.

"He makes himself available—even when he is sitting on a fishing boat, he'll answer the phone," Dr. Hellin said. "He always helps us out when we are in need. Multiple times I've been in a surgical suite, needing some advice, and Andy's been kind enough to respond."

Together, Dr. Baker and Dr. Bentsen have created a positive work culture with little turnover. In fact, Dr. Baker's technician Willy has been with him for as long as he has worked at the clinic, and for the past five years, every Thursday morning, the veterinarians eat breakfast together, allowing them to discuss professional and personal matters without interruption.

Dr. Baker loves the camaraderie of his clinic, the tight-knit veterinary community in The Valley and the results that come from his surgical cases.

"The most rewarding are neurological cases like back cases that come in with a ruptured disc and they can't walk," Dr. Baker said. "You operate on them, and then they walk. It still amazes me that that happens. You have clients that come in that think they are going to have to put their dog to sleep, and you're able to fix them and they do well. They're so happy, that's what is rewarding."