

ANIMAL WELFARE
FOUNDATION OF CANADA

IN MEMORY OF

DR. FIONA RIOJA-LANG

1981-2019

"Expect litte, give a lot."



A CASE FOR SUPPORT

Dr. Fiona Rioja-Lang Travel Award

Who Was Fiona?

Dr. Fiona Connell Rioja Lang grew up in Gourrock, a small town on the west coast of Scotland, but her life brought her to see the world. She was the kind of person who made friends everywhere she went, not because she tried to, but because she genuinely cared about the people in front of her.



After earning her BSc in Zoology from the University of Glasgow, she pursued her passion for animal welfare at the University of Edinburgh, completing both a Master's Degree and a PhD in Applied Animal Behaviour and Welfare.

Her doctoral research focused on dairy cow welfare and feeding behaviour, a subject she approached with the same warmth she brought to everything in her life.

From Edinburgh, Fiona's work took her to Canada, where she spent two years at the Prairie Swine Centre researching the welfare of pigs. She then moved to Merida in Yucatán, Mexico, where she lived with her family.

She continued her work remotely, contributing to the National Farm Animal Care Council of Canada and eventually becoming a Research Fellow at the Jeanne Marchig International Centre for Animal Welfare Education, investigating priority welfare issues across the UK.

"Fiona had amazing energy at conferences. I remember attending a welfare conference at the University of Guelph with her. We shared a dormitory room on campus, and many of her friends were in attendance. Fiona would attend talks all day long and then go out at night to socialize until all hours! I went to bed early, wondering when she would make it back and how on earth she did it all!"

- Jennifer Brown





But Fiona's work was never just academic.

Between her research commitments, she was on the ground in Mexico, helping free-roaming dogs in her community. Between conferences, she was connecting colleagues across continents, building bridges in a field where collaboration is everything.



She was a devoted wife and a loving mother. Her friends and colleagues remember her as someone who made rooms feel warmer simply by walking into them.

Her personal motto said everything about who she was:

"Expect little, give a lot."

Fiona tragically passed away in 2019, at just 37 years old. The loss was felt by her family, by her many friends, and by a global animal welfare community that had come to rely on her energy, her ideas, and her belief in a better future for animals.



That future is still worth building.

The Future She Was Building

Fiona understood something that not everyone in science does: that knowledge only travels as far as the people carrying it.

She built her career by showing up at conferences in Edinburgh and Ottawa, at workshops in Mexico City, at kitchen tables in Merida, because she knew that the best ideas come from bringing people together.

Animal welfare is a global challenge. The animals we care about do not stop at borders, and neither do the problems they face. Progress in this field depends on researchers, students, and advocates who can access the world's best thinking, no matter where they are starting from.



Travel grants in the animal welfare space are few and far between.

For many early-career researchers and professionals, the cost of attending a single national or international conference can be the difference between staying connected to a global community and working in isolation.

"Travel grants can make the difference between someone being able to attend an international conference or missing out entirely. They allow young researchers to present their work, hear from leading scientists, build networks, visit farms and research facilities, and bring back new ideas that can influence their future work. For a field like animal welfare, which depends so much on shared learning, collaboration and understanding different systems, these opportunities are invaluable. A memorial travel award in Fiona's name feels especially fitting because travel, learning and international connection meant so much to her."

- Jenny Gibbons



The Dr. Fiona Rioja-Lang Travel Award



Fiona knew that feeling of a door opening.

She experienced it herself, moving from Gourock, to Glasgow, to Edinburgh, to Canada, to Mexico, always following her curiosity and always bringing others along for the journey.

She was never finished. At the time of her passing, she was deep in research, building new collaborations, planning next steps. The work she was doing had years ahead of it, decades, even.



The Dr. Fiona Rioja-Lang Travel Award exists to carry that work forward.

Each year, the award will help animal welfare professionals and students in Canada attend conferences, short courses, and workshops anywhere in the world, and international students come to Canada to do the same.

It will fund the trips that spark ideas, the conversations that become collaborations, and the connections that last entire careers.

It will send people into rooms that Fiona would have been thrilled to walk into herself.

And it will carry her name, and her spirit, with them when they go.

The Award

The Dr. Fiona Rioja-Lang Travel Award is administered by the Animal Welfare Foundation of Canada (AWFC). It was designed to reflect everything Fiona stood for: commitment to continuous learning, science, compassion, and connection. We are working with friends, family, colleagues and the institutions she worked with to turn this into a global effort.



What does it fund?

Each award covers up to \$2,500 (CAD) toward travel, registration, and accommodation costs for attending a conference, workshop, or short course (up to three days) in animal welfare. Two to three awards will be granted each year, depending on available funds. The award is intentionally broad in scope, just as Fiona was. It covers all species, from farmed animals to free-roaming dogs, and supports work at every level of the field.

Who can apply?

The award is open to anyone working on or studying animal welfare in Canada: undergraduate and graduate students, postdoctoral researchers, scientists, advocates, and professionals.

International individuals may also apply to attend conferences in Canada. The one requirement is a genuine commitment to improving the lives of animals.

What does it make possible?

Imagine a graduate student in Winnipeg who has been studying dairy cow welfare for three years.

She has been accepted to present her research at an international conference in Edinburgh, but the cost of the trip is far beyond her stipend.

With Fiona's award, she goes. She presents her research. She meets the scientists whose papers she has been reading for years. She comes home with three new ideas and two new collaborators. That is the kind of journey Fiona took many times. That is exactly what this award is for.





When is it launched?

The award opens for applications every year on October 16th: Fiona's birthday. It felt right to mark the day not with sadness, but with an invitation to continue her legacy.



How your support works

Fiona gave generously to everyone around her, her time, her ideas, her warmth. Supporting this award is a way of paying that forward.

There are two layers to how the award is funded, and they work together. The first makes an immediate difference. The second makes a permanent one.

RIGHT NOW

Your donation funds a real award

In the first five years, donations go directly toward funding travel awards.

A real person, this year, gets to attend a conference they could not otherwise afford.

It is immediate and it is tangible. You will know that your contribution sent someone into a room full of ideas, just as Fiona always found her way into those rooms.

OVER TIME

Your donation grows into something permanent

As donations accumulate, a portion is set aside and invested alongside institutional donations. The returns from that investment eventually fund the awards on their own, year after year, without needing to ask for support again.

Think of it like planting a tree. You water it for a few years, and eventually it grows and shades the ground on its own.

That is the endowment.





The Endowment: Fiona's Legacy, In Perpetuity

Our goal is to raise a minimum of \$100,000 CAD, with an ideal target of \$125,000 CAD by 2031.

Once the endowment reaches that level, it will generate enough annual investment income to fund two to three awards every year, forever, without spending down the principal.

Every donation, whether large or small, contributes to that goal. Individual gifts from friends and colleagues build the foundation. Institutional contributions accelerate it. Together, they ensure that Fiona's name continues to open doors for the next generation of animal welfare advocates, long after any of us are here to champion it ourselves.

Fiona worked her whole career to build something that would last. So we are making sure it does.



During the first five years

As the fund grows

By 2031 and beyond



your donations go directly to award recipients.

a portion is invested, and the returns begin to sustain the award.

the endowment funds the award independently, in perpetuity.

The Travel Award Committee



Giuliana Miguel Pacheco

President of the Animal Welfare Foundation of Canada. Colleague and friend.

I met Fiona in September 2015, brought together by a mutual friend who saw how much we had in common, shared life and career experiences in Scotland, Canada, and Mexico. We quickly became 'sister souls,' navigating the highs and lows of our careers and personal lives through endless texts, shared tears, and deep laughter. Though we only saw each other a handful of times in person, she was my constant anchor. Fiona always believed in holding the door open for others, inviting them into the conversation to share, learn and grow.

On behalf of Fiona's family and friends, we are incredibly proud to lead the creation of this Memorial Travel Award and deeply grateful to AWFC for partnering with us to honour her beautiful spirit.



Gillian Burke, Fiona's sister

Fiona's Sister

Our family are so incredibly proud to see Fiona honoured in a way that reflects her passion for animal welfare, commitment to learning and her belief in bringing people together. This award doesn't just remember Fiona, it carries her values forward and begins a legacy she would have truly loved.



Jennifer Brown

Colleague and friend

Jennifer and Fiona worked together as post docs, conducting research on pig behaviour and welfare at the Prairie Swine Centre from 2009 to 2011. We shared an office and collaborated on projects all week long. Being new to the prairies, we spent weekends working on a bucket list of "things to do in Saskatchewan"; visiting parks, museums and festivals, and quickly became best friends. After Fiona moved to Merida in 2011 we continued to collaborate and connect at conferences.





Jenny Gibbons

Colleague and friend

I did my PhD at SRUC alongside Fiona, and we became both colleagues and friends through our shared work on dairy cattle behaviour and welfare. During our PhDs, we travelled together to several international and national conferences.

I am part of this committee because Fiona was a dear friend and colleague, and I would be honoured to help support an award that reflects her curiosity, generosity and love of international learning. Having experienced first-hand how valuable conference travel was to us as PhD students, I feel strongly about helping others access similar opportunities in her memory



Jeremy Marchant

Colleague and friend

My first interactions with Fiona were within the International Society for Applied Ethology. We met at several meetings and when she made the move to Canada, she joined the pig world! As a couple of UK expats in North America, it was always a pleasure to meet up and have those easy chats with slang and cultural references that go over our N.American colleagues' heads at times!

When she moved to Merida, I kept trying to get academic colleagues to hire her as rumors of an animal behavior/welfare course based in Merida were circulating. Our last messenger conversation - me: "I'll expect an invite when you become Professor Lang" Fiona: "I am the eternal optimist!" She did indeed see the good in people and the good in the world, and I'm honored to help her legacy continue.



Sébastien Goumon

Researcher in Animal Welfare. Fiona's colleague and friend





Join Us

Fiona spent her life building bridges between people and between ideas. She believed that by working together, we could create a kinder world for animals. She was right. And she was only getting started.

By supporting this award, you are not just honoring her memory. You are continuing her work. You are sending someone into a room she would have loved, with ideas she would have celebrated, and connections she would have nurtured.

“Expect little, give a lot.”

[Support Fiona’s legacy today.](#)

The Dr. Fiona Rioja-Lang Travel Award is administered by the Animal Welfare Foundation of Canada, a registered Canadian charity (CRA No. 11878-7290-RR0001). All donations receive an official charitable tax receipt.

About the artwork: The artwork was commissioned from Samantha Giroux of [iDesign Sam](#), and like Fiona herself, it refuses to belong to just one place. Scottish knot, Mexican Alebrijes, and a wash of purple come together in a piece that feels exactly like her."