

Conard family - 1

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

"If you're looking for fame and fortune, you may not find it. But if you're looking for a place to serve, you can definitely find it here." Those words of wisdom might apply to many places and types of careers, but in this case, it refers to a family physician who is serving rural Kansas and beyond. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Shawn Conard is a family doctor at Minneola District Hospital in Minneola, Kansas. Minneola is a rural community in Clark County, south of Dodge City.

Shawn grew up in Hays and went to K-State. He got involved with Intervarsity Christian Fellowship where he went on a mission trip with a young woman named Gayly. Their relationship flourished and the two were wed.

Shawn attended medical school at KUMC and became part of a pilot program for Primary Care in which he was placed in McPherson with Dr. Thomas. He then "matched" at Via Christi Family Medicine where they taught full scope family practice including obstetrics.

After graduation, he and Gayly moved to west Texas where he worked in family practice and emergency room duty. After their first two children were born, they wanted to move closer to their families in Kansas and began searching for jobs.

While in residency, Shawn had met Dr. Marc Stephens, a faculty member at Via Christi. Marc's father was Dr. Charles Stephens, a highly regarded family doctor who practiced for more than 50 years in the community of Minneola. Dr. Charles Stephens and another son, Dr. Todd Stephens, began recruiting Shawn to Minneola. "The breadth of practice was incredible," Shawn said.

In this practice, the physicians had a tradition of working in the mission field overseas. "They were a great group of doctors and wonderful mentors," Shawn said. "They taught me that our faith is key to practicing and thriving in medicine."

Today, Shawn is one of two doctors in the practice along with several mid-level assistants. They plan to expand the staff so that, this fall, they would have three physician assistants and three nurse practitioners. The Minneola District Hospital is considered a critical access rural health clinic.

Being a rural doctor can be very demanding. Most Kansas counties are considered medically underserved. Shawn said that one of the advantages of being in a practice like this is that he can concentrate on medicine while the hospital takes care of the paperwork. "Paperwork requirements are getting greater everyday," Shawn said. "Fortunately, we have a great CEO, Deb Bruner."

Dr. Stephen's son Todd later moved to Wichita to join the faculty of Via Christi. He started a program called The International Medical Fellowship, under which two to four family practice residents will go overseas and practice for six months in Africa, and then come back to the states to study in rotations such as trauma, orthopedics, infectious disease and public health.

The program brings life-changing experiences. "It really prepares you for the variety of things you face in rural medicine," Shawn said. "These residents also provide locums to cover our hospital and ER here, among other towns, which helps pay for the program."

Can health care be sustained in rural Kansas? Can we attract and retain rural doctors? “There is hope, for those who want to serve,” Shawn said. “But it takes staying power. You can’t just train the doctor, you need to prepare the spouse too,” he said. “Job creation is really important so that there’s a place for the spouse.”

Shawn sees the joys and challenges of rural practice firsthand. After all, he’s located in the town of Minneola, population 721 people. Now, that’s rural.

“If you’re looking for fame and fortune, you may not find it. But if you’re looking for a place to serve, you can definitely find it here.” We commend Shawn Conard for sharing those words and for making a difference with his service in rural Kansas as well as in the mission field.

And there’s more. The Conard family has adopted children from China, including three with special needs. They are now experiencing a breakthrough that is helping their daughter. We’ll learn about that next week.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.