Jon Bigler is a physician assistant but residents of Ashland love him like an old fashioned doctor.

He is quick to point out that he is not a doctor and he corrects patients if they call him Dr. Jon. However, Bigler likes nothing better than treating people with the care and concern of a doctor. He makes house calls and doesn’t think twice about giving the elderly, or anyone, a ride to the clinic if they need it.

“I care a lot about these people. They are great to work with and work for,” he said.

Ashland, nestled in the Red Hills of southwest Kansas, has a growing health care system thanks to Bigler. Ashland Health Center CEO and Administrator Benjamin Anderson said he has never seen a community build its health care around a PA, but that is exactly what Ashland has successfully done.

“He is a gifted communicator. Patients love him. He manages their care and takes ownership of his patients’ care,” said Anderson.

He recalled a time when Bigler was driving down the street and noticed a patient’s car was idling in the garage with the driver’s door ajar and an open trunk was loaded with groceries. Bigler stopped, entered the home and found the elderly man fast asleep in a chair. "Jon shut the car off, unloaded the groceries and put the man to bed. That’s the kind of guy he is," Anderson said, noting that he has never had a complaint about Bigler’s bedside manner.

Today, the Ashland Health Center (AHC) has a thriving rural health clinic, a 24-bed critical access hospital, a 21-bed Long Term Care Unit, a six-bed independent living apartment complex and a home health service. In addition to Bigler, AHC has one doctor and two nurse practitioners. Administrators are in the process of recruiting a second doctor.

This is a far different situation than the one Bigler stepped into six years ago. After 11 providers in 20 years passed through Ashland, Anderson says citizens began to lose confidence in their health care system and the hospital was on the verge of closing.

It was Bigler’s commitment that helped turn the tide. People in the community and throughout Clark County learned they could count on him. Anderson sums it up with one word—trust. “He has earned their trust. And the trust we had in him let us build an entire medical staff around him. I have never seen a PA have this kind of impact,” said Anderson, who has been at AHC for three years.

In 2006, Bigler joined Ashland Health Center immediately following graduation from physician assistant training at Wichita State University (WSU). For several years, Bigler was the sole medical provider in Ashland. He has had no less than nine supervising physicians, and until recently, most were at least 30 miles away.

“Jon has hung in there with us and held down the fort. He has literally kept us going,” said Renita Ediger, receptionist, Ashland Health Care Clinic. “For a long time, he did it all—hospital, clinic, ER, nursing home, on-call.”

It was typical for Bigler to be on call from 5 p.m. Sunday all the way through 6 p.m. Friday. People of all ages from across Clark County, population 2,081, learned Bigler was a keeper. He was always there to fix them up after car wrecks and other injuries. He takes care of their lacerations, fever and dehydration. He helps parents address ADHD in their children, a diagnosis he’s familiar with

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since he has dealt with it his entire life.

Just in the last six months administrators hired Daniel Shuman, DO, a physician Bigler helped select. Shuman has a level of compassion and service AHC has been looking for.

“Jon has the trust of the hospital board, administration and medical staff. He earned that. We wanted him to be part of the search for a physician because if Jon was not comfortable with the person we wanted to hire, we would not hire them,” said Anderson.

Bigler said he has found success in remote Ashland partly because he knows his boundaries. It doesn’t hurt that he likes to be busy—probably an understatement—and he has a sense of humor.

“I know what I can handle and I know what I should package and ship,” he said. “Being out in western Kansas, I have to know my limitations.”

He created a good network of health care advisors and he has the equipment he needs, such as a CT scanner.

One thing Bigler brought to his post, and perhaps a good explanation of his staying power, is maturity. Even though he arrived in Ashland straight-out-of-school, this is his second career. He entered the PA program at the age of 42. Prior, he taught biology and English at Labette County High School for 15 years. He was also the school’s head football and wrestling coach.

“I still miss coaching, but now I help kids in different ways. I can influence students and parents doing this job,” he said, noting that sometimes he still gives young patients advice before a big game.

Though making a livelihood as a PA is his second career, medicine wasn’t too foreign a choice. His late father was a well-known surgeon in Garden City; and two of his brothers are doctors of dermatology and urology.

“If I wanted to get into the conversation around the family dinner table, I had to get into the field of medicine,” jokes Bigler.

He has no regrets about coming to Ashland, but it has not been without sacrifice. His wife of nearly 25 years, Lori, supported his career decision while continuing to teach high school in Wichita until the last of their three daughters graduated high school. She joined him in Ashland just a year-and-a-half ago.

“There has to be a lot of adaptability in a marriage,” Bigler says, “Sometimes patients come before family,” Lori adds.

Now that they are both in Ashland, she teaches at Ashland High School and they are happy to be free of the days when his on-call schedule barely gave him 36 hours to be with the family on weekends.

Bigler is just what the doctor ordered in Ashland. “His job and his family are his life,” said Ediger. “Both he and Lori have been a blessing for our community.”

Now that he’s only on-call four days a week, and he’s not traveling to Wichita on weekends, Bigler likes devoting more time to hobbies. Of course, he likes sports. He was once a wrestler and a gymnast, and he was a yell leader at the University of Kansas. He also enjoys watching and playing tennis.

He’s a handyman and he likes being outdoors whether it’s in the garden or taking in the scenic views of the hills that surround Ashland. He especially likes to hike and hunt for fossils and artifacts, like arrowheads.

Once when he was hunting with his daughter, he stumbled upon a large fossil with large teeth. It was a baby mastodon, an animal that would have resembled a mammoth. People kept asking him, ‘Are you sure it’s not a buffalo head?’ He assured them it was not and now it is on display in the WSU Archaeology Department.

“My medical training came in handy there too,” he said. “Those teeth were just massive.”

He is a gifted communicator. Patients love him. He manages their care and takes ownership of their patients’ care.”

**Benjamin Anderson, Ashland Health Center CEO and Administrator**

Provider Spotlights are provided by Rural Health Education and Services, University of Kansas Medical Center ruralhealth.kumc.edu

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