Caring for rural America

Practicing medicine may be Mary Beth Miller's second career, but it's her first love.

The University of Kansas School of Medicine graduate and St. Francis, Kan., physician thought about attending medical school while she was earning her undergraduate degree.

“But I had the idea that small town kids can’t compete with big town kids,” the small town Nebraska native said.

So she pushed thoughts of medical school to the back of her mind, finished her undergraduate degree in medical technology from the University of Nebraska and accepted a job as a medical technician in Nebraska and Arizona.

Several years, one marriage, three children later and at the age of 36, the thought of becoming a physician still brewed in her mind.

“I still had that desire for medicine. I found that some of the doctors I worked with proved to me it wasn’t rocket science, and I could do this,” she said, adding that medical school is hard work and requires dedication and the desire to become a physician.

In 1982, she applied and was accepted to the KU School of Medicine.

After spending so many years in the laboratory as a medical technician, she thought pathology would be her specialty of choice. But that quickly changed.

A calling for family medicine

Miller spent 12 years working in a lab, and she later discovered that wasn't the place for her when it came to practicing medicine. Patient interaction was key for her.

“Once I came to KU, I got involved in the Family Medicine Interest Group, and I realized I didn’t want to be in an office looking at slides,” she said. “I wanted to interact with patients.”

That sealed the deal for her, and she chose family medicine as her specialty. A six-week rural preceptorship in Oakley, Kan., solidified her decision.

It was early in medical school that she met Rick Kellerman, M.D., who would become her mentor. Right away Kellerman knew she was something special.

“I knew immediately that she was the type of resident we wanted,” he said, remembering their first encounter when Miller was a first-year medical student visiting Salina during rural health weekend. “That initial judgment was exactly correct.”

Miller continues to have a relationship with the school, regularly hosting medical students completing their rural preceptorships as a volunteer clinical assistant professor at the KU School of Medicine–Wichita campus.
And it looks like she’s doing something right when it comes to teaching.

Miller has won several awards, including the 2012 American Academy of Family Physicians Exemplary Teaching Award in the volunteer category. The award recognizes family medicine faculty members who have demonstrated exemplary teaching skills or have developed and implemented innovative new teaching models or programs.

“She has a lot of energy and enthusiasm,” Kellerman said. “She’s very smart and just a real wonderful role model — the sort of person who can communicate with patients and with medical students, and it is just really special how she does it.”

**Caring for rural patients**

Part of that ability to communicate with people on different levels comes from her own experiences as a physician and a patient. In the early 1980s, Miller’s sister was diagnosed with inflammatory breast cancer and later died in 1984. Nearly two decades later, Miller herself was diagnosed with breast cancer.

“I think there was a part of that whole experience when I kind of felt that the medical system failed her,” she said of her sister’s diagnosis.

Those experiences have shaped how she treats her patients, reminding her that patients can be vulnerable and put trust in their providers.

“I’m amazed at the number of times a patient will cry in my office,” she said. “Something has gone on in their lives and they want to share that with you. It comes down to trust.”

And Miller trusts her patients as well. Following her cancer diagnosis, she placed a letter in the paper to inform the community because she “didn’t want the town filled with rumors.”

“After I had done that, a stoic older gentleman came into the clinic … and hugged me. With a tear in his eye, he didn’t say anything. He gave me a hug and left,” she recalls. “He couldn’t voice what he wanted to but his actions said so much more.”

**Time of transition**

While Miller loves practicing in rural Kansas, after 22 years she’s ready to add to her skill set. By August 2015, Cheyenne County Clinic is expected to have two new physicians, at which time Miller said she will “slide out of the picture” to venture to southern California where her daughter lives.

“Family medicine is one specialty that I think rural family medicine is much different than city family medicine,” she said about earning experience practicing in an urban setting.

Once she gives that a try, she’s not sure what’s next. It could be rural practice again. She’s keeping her mind open about teaching a residency program, which she thinks could benefit from having urban experience.

Either way, Miller is an example that the door is always open to follow a dream.

“It’s never too late,” she said, “for the career you want.”