A rural Kansas doctor was nine years old when he learned of a death that he believed was preventable. As he processed the loss, the 4th-grader felt drawn to a career in the medical field.

“My grandfather died at a VA hospital in Iowa, and I couldn't quite understand why they couldn't 'fix' him,” said Michael Oller, M.D. “Nine is just a tough age to deal with death. I don't know that I’d even had any pets die. Some of (my career direction) was borne out of anger. I thought maybe I could get to the place where I could prevent somebody from feeling how I felt. Looking back — my grandfather had a lot of medical problems, so I've gotten more realistic about it, but that's how it started.”

Now that he's a family physician in Stockton, Kan., Oller is able to help “fix” bodies and other systems and give rural Kansans the care he believes they deserve.

“Right now, our country's sort of upside-down about what to do with health care and how to fix things, and I think — on some level — I get to be some of the fixes that need to happen,” he said. “I think all doctors, at some point, want to save the world, just like my experience with my grandfather, but then you think, 'Wow, there are a lot of people in the world.' I don't think I can realistically save them all, but I'm going to do what I can with this 5,200.”

During medical school at the KU School of Medicine, Oller found his better half — a nurse-turned-med-student named Beth Loney, M.D.

Loney had practiced as a nurse for two years before going back to school to become a family physician.

“They were several of the doctors I worked with that made me want to move up,” Loney said. “I always knew I'd go on — I just thought I'd go on in nursing — but a couple of doctors encouraged me to do the med school route.”

In addition to meeting the love of her life in medical school, Loney said there are plenty of reasons why she is thankful she went the route the doctors encouraged and journeyed from her home city of Joplin, Mo. to the small town of Stockton.

“They were several families — grandparents, parents and kids I've delivered — so I've really seen them from the instant they were born, all the way through. That is so much fun. Also, I like being able to come into an area where I was really needed, and fill that void.”

Loney said she and her husband enjoy being able to do “full-scope medicine.” They both take care of patients in the hospital, the E.R. and the clinic. She delivers babies and performs C-sections, while he does colonoscopies, and they both care for nursing home patients.

Zachary Muhrer, business manager of Post Rock Family Medicine, said the medical couple is greatly appreciated by the Rooks County community.

“Beth's niche here is taking on a lot of new OB patients — she has really grown in that role, and she's kind of become the new 'OB guru,'” Muhrer said. “Beth is very outgoing and bubbly. A lot of people have come to her.
There are very few people in town that don’t know her. She’s kind of a social magnet.”

While her husband has a more reserved personality, he is also making a difference that rural Kansans notice and appreciate.

“I just saw on Facebook the other day, two different people — totally separate from each other — who put on there, ‘Thanks to Dr. Oller for stopping by our home and checking on our (child),’” Muhrer said. “One was a little girl with a lingering ear infection. He just stopped by to see how she was doing.”

In addition to drop-in check-ups, as well as his family physician and emergency room work, Oller listens to emergency services radio and occasionally jumps in to help with dangerous accident scenes. Additionally, he attends every high school football and basketball games he can to make sure that if any student athlete gets injured, he is there to assess them right on the court side. There is no compensation for this service.

“There’s really no compensation for that — it’s just, the people in this county are the patients that I feel responsible for taking care of,” he said.

Oller said he is working to set up patient services that are more conducive to caring for rural patients in quicker and more efficient ways. His favorite thing about practicing in Stockton is the opportunity to improve health care access for his patients.

“When I worked at Wesley as a resident, that’s a big hospital, so if a patient came in and saw me at the E.R., got treated, went home and was still not getting better, he would call and say, ‘I saw Dr. Oller,’ and they would say, ‘We don’t know who Dr. Oller is because the hospital is on one side and the clinic is on the other. You’ll just have to come in,’” he said. “Here, if a patient is not getting better, we get in touch. We provide personal follow-up for patients so they don’t have to keep going around between providers and not getting the care they deserve for really simple conditions.”

Muhrer said this type of care is part of what makes rural health care special.

“There’s kind of that ‘small community bond’ between providers and their patients,” Muhrer said. “You hear about it, but you don’t know it until you see it.”

Muhrer said he wanted to emphasize how much of a draw Rooks County is for formerly urban families. He is from Chicago, his wife is from New Zealand and they previously lived in Cincinnati and St. Louis before settling in Stockton.

Additionally, Dr.’s Jen Brull, Daniel Sanchez and Lynn Fisher draw interns to the county, and students in residency serve rotations at the hospital.

“There’s always a new intern out this way, which I think is great,” Muhrer said.

Loney came to Rooks County because she served a rotation with Dr. Brull of Plainville, Kan., and then she came back twice during her medical school training. After 10 weeks of practicing in the area, the doctors asked if she would like to join the clinic. When Loney and Oller got married, Rooks County received them both.

Despite her urban upbringings, Loney said she, her husband and their two-year-old daughter are enjoying life on the prarie.

“Your kids can play outside and you don’t worry so much — people in the community look out for them,” Loney said. “You know all the people at the grocery store. You know the people running the businesses you frequent. You really know the teachers in the school system. There’s lots of space and beautiful scenery.”

The couple recently purchased a plot of land where they are landscaping and building a house. Additionally, Oller enjoys nature photography when he’s out of the office.

Muhrer said he wanted to debunk any myths that “rural health care” automatically equals “a three-room clinic where we send every patient away to the E.R.”

“It’s really good to expose students, before they’ve made their choices, to how great rural health care can be when the community buys into it,” he said. “The facility in (nearby) Plainville is less than a decade old. Our facility here is a little over two years old, so there’s money being spent on health care. There are resources here. Couple that with the benefits of a small community, and you have a great scenario for young practitioners. In general, things are pretty great out here.”

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Provider Spotlights are provided by Rural Health Education and Services, University of Kansas Medical Center. For more information, call 913-588-1228, email aellis2@kumc.edu or visit us online at www.ruralhealth.kumc.edu.