Even as high school sweethearts in Scott City, Chris and Christine Cupp knew they'd like to return to western Kansas to live and raise a family.

“Small rural towns are not quite the Norman Rockwell pictures they once were, but it's still a great place to raise a family,” Chris Cupp, MD, said. “We always felt safe growing up and we wanted our kids to feel the same and to grow up in the same environment we did. It was a pretty easy decision, it just made sense.”

He also always knew he wanted to go to medical school but was not sure about what field of medicine. After graduating summa cum laude from Washburn University with a chemistry degree in 1996, he attended KU School of Medicine - Wichita, where he graduated with an MD degree in 2000. He received outstanding resident awards all three years of his family medicine residency.

When he finished his residency, there weren’t any openings in his hometown, so he took a position at Greeley County Hospital and Cupp, his wife and their three children settled in Tribune Kan. When their hometown needed a doctor in 2004, they moved to Scott City where he became chief of medical staff at Scott County Hospital. Located 60 miles from the Colorado border, the county has a population of 5,000, including both Chris and Christine Cupp’s parents.

Now the Cupp’s three sons – Chase, and twins Colton and Connor, – not only can grow up around their grandparents, but they can attend first and third grades at the same elementary school their mother did, with some of the same teachers. They’re also involved in Boy Scouts, 4-H, recreational football and school activities.

Their father also is active, not only in the local community, but in medical organizations. He is president of the Southwest Kansas Medical Society, which focuses on issues facing rural practitioners, and is secretary for the Kansas Academy of Family Physicians. He'll serve as president of the Accademy in three years.

“I see that as another way to get involved and to get people to head out to western Kansas,” Cupp said.

Not only does Cupp appreciate the benefits of living in a small town, he’s also “grateful to live in such a progressive community.” In September, Scott County approved a $24 million bond issue to replace the local hospital. It draws patients from surrounding counties because some of their hospitals no longer deliver babies. Scott City has a 20-bed hospital and the only clinic in the county.

Construction is expected to begin in the next five months with completion within 18 months. The new facility will include the addition of a nuclear medicine department and a second operating room.

Small-town living has both its rewards and challenges, Cupp noted. “You’re treated with a lot of respect and your thoughts are listened to. But it’s a double-edged sword because you can’t be anonymous. No matter where you are, including the grocery store, you’re the doc.”

Rural doctors probably work more weekends, put in more hours, and see more patients in a day than most urban doctors. They also can perform a wider range of services, according to Cupp.

“I can be a full-spectrum family physician,” he said. “I get to do any procedure I feel comfortable doing; I’m not limited by the politics of a larger facility. I can be more of an old-fashioned family physician.”

Cupp also pointed out how practicing in a rural area helps pay for a medical school education. Cupp took advantage of the Kansas Medical Student Loan, which pays off student loans after practicing in a rural area for four years and the Kansas Bridging Plan, which provides community matching funds.

What advice would he give to medical students considering a rural practice? “It can seem intimidating to practice in a rural area, so I’d recommend spending some time there,” he said. “Come follow us around at our practice. See what life is really like. It’s a great opportunity. We need to get more physicians out here.”

He noted that Scott City needs at least one more doctor, Lakin needs two, and most of the western Kansas communities are in need or soon will be.