When Rebecca Lohman, MD, was growing up in Chanute, it barely occurred to her that she'd like to be a doctor. And it certainly never crossed her mind that she'd someday be practicing medicine in the town of her high school's archrival, Iola, just 22 miles north of her hometown.

She had wanted to become a music teacher, but when she was a junior in high school she became interested in a medical career. She graduated from high school in 1996 and chose Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, because she wanted to be part of a smaller campus community. By then she was on track to becoming a physician and in quick succession earned a biology degree from Drake in 2000, graduated from KU Medical School in 2004, and finished her residency three years later.

Along the way she did a rural rotation with, Steffen Shamburg, MD, a physician in Hiawatha, KS, who became a professional as well as personal mentor. “He had a huge influence on me, and my rural rotations had a huge impact on my desire to work in a small community,” she said.

Now Dr. Lohman has a medical student doing a rotation with her, and she's very much enjoying the experience. “It's nice to be able to show them the fun side of working in a small town,” she said.

While in her residency at KU Family Medicine, Dr. Lohman did consider staying in Kansas City. “Practicing in a rural area was always in the back of my mind, but I wanted to keep all my options open,” she said.

Once she investigated the possibilities - and the benefits of having her medical school loans forgiven if she agreed to serve a rural community – the decision to practice in a rural area was an easy one.

She interviewed a couple of other places, but then Iola “fell into my lap” after her husband, a pharmacist, made an offhand comment to a physician in Iola about whether they needed another doctor.

“They weren't actually searching for an extra doctor at the time,” she said.

After Dr. Lohman and her husband, Nich, whom she had met at Drake, moved to Iola in summer 2007, they had two children. She began work for The Family Physicians Clinic, and Nich became director of the pharmacy at the local hospital. Soon after they adopted two of her nieces and she became pregnant. Their four daughters and one son range in age from 12 to 1 ½ years.

Dr. Lohman was an employee at The Family Physicians Clinic for two years before becoming a partner last January. The three other partners have long-established practices in Iola. Their office also has four mid-level providers. Dr. Lohman is the only female physician in the community of 6,000 residents.

Her mother still lives in Chanute, which is a 25-minute drive, and several siblings live nearby. She enjoys living near family and misses little about the city – certainly not the traffic, though she jokes that the short commute in Iola doesn't give her time to listen to National Public Radio. She occasionally misses restaurants and shopping but has found plenty else in the small community to be involved in, including school activities and local boards and committees.

“I love the feeling there's something I can do to improve the community,” she said.

A smaller community has allowed her to get to know her patients better. “I get to know entire families and family dynamics,” she said. “I can deliver a baby and take care of the grandma. I just love taking care of the whole patient and the whole family.”

She also does a lot of things she couldn't do in the city such as provide ob-gyn services and take care of a greater variety of problems since specialists are not nearby. In addition to her practice, she works 12- or 24-hour shifts in the Allen County Hospital's emergency room a few times a month and is on-call on Wednesday evenings and every fourth weekend.

“I really enjoy doing that,” she said. “I like the difference in pace in the ER versus the clinic.”

Looking back, she's absolutely convinced she made the right decision. “I can't imagine doing anything else at this point,” she said. “I'm so glad I made this choice.”