When Terry Mills, MD, a Texas native and University of Oklahoma College of Medicine graduate, was invited for an interview in Newton, KS, he had to look at a map to see where it was located.

It was 1999, and he'd struck a deal with his wife, Dianna, that it was her turn to choose what direction they moved. She had followed him to medical school, and they were then in Waco, Texas, where she was completing a doctorate in psychology at Baylor University and he was finishing his residency. As a family physician, he was confident he could find a position wherever they ended up.

She had applied for internship programs and been interviewed in eight states, and Dr. Mills had applications filled out and ready to mail for licenses in all eight states. She landed her first-place choice—a spot at a collaborative psychology program that included KU Medical School-Wichita and Newton-based Prairie View—so they prepared to move to south-central Kansas.

Dr. Mills had never met Rick Kellerman, MD, chair of the Department of Family and Community Medicine at KU School of Medicine-Wichita but had heard of him, so he gave his office a call. “Dr. Kellerman’s secretary literally tore yellow pages out of the phone book—this was before Google—and mailed them to me,” Dr. Mills recalled.

He mailed out several letters, and among the responses was a request for an interview at Wichita Clinic Bethel in Newton, population 17,000. The smallest place either he or Dianna had ever lived was Waco, which has a population of about 122,000. He admits now, with a laugh, that all he knew about Kansas was Jayhawk basketball.

After finding Newton on a map and going for an interview, he accepted a position, though he refused to sign the standard three-year contract. “I was sure we’d be there only two years—one year for my wife’s internship and another for a year of supervised practice,” he said. “That was 11 years, three children, and two houses ago. We just love Newton and Kansas.”

They have found the “smaller, tighter-knit community” an excellent place to raise their three sons—Matthew, Mark, and Micah—who range in age from 4 to 9. Dianna now practices part-time as a clinical psychologist through Prairie View with the public schools in Newton.

In addition to enjoying the community, Dr. Mills has found Wichita Clinic Bethel to be supportive of his military service and occasional deployments with the 4204th U.S. Army Hospital unit based in Topeka. He inherited a commitment to serving his country from his father, and soon after graduating from medical school, Dr. Mills walked into an Army recruiting office in south Oklahoma City and signed up.

He credits the clinic with making it possible for him to continue service as a major in the Medical Corps for the U.S. Army Reserves. He was deployed to Germany in 2001, followed by a stint at a U.S. base in 2002. In 2005, he was ready to board a flight to Abu Ghraib when the deployment was canceled because of the controversy over prisoner treatment.

He spent the first four months of 2008 at the 325 Combat Support Hospital
in Al Asad, Iraq, where he served as an ER doctor on a Marine base. He said he felt safe because the base was 40 square miles, completely enclosed and “guarded by 18,000 Marines.” Dr. Mills was part of a team of 12-15 physicians that rotated quarterly through the hospital. He felt well-equipped, technology-wise, though the hospital did not have MRI capabilities.

“It is only because of the incredible support from my local partners and the administration that I have been able to stay in the military,” he said. “My partners work very hard while I’m gone.”

Dr. Mills also has a physician assistant or nurse practitioner to help maintain continuity of care with patients while he’s gone. Because he is a commissioned officer, his commitment is open-ended.

He feels fortunate to have been able to serve in Iraq and “see the deep level of their gratitude. It was great to be there and serve my country and be part of something bigger than yourself.”

After returning from Iraq, he assumed the presidency of the Kansas Academy of Family Physicians (KAFP), which has 900 active physician members. Ever since Dr. Mills was a young boy growing up in Houston, he knew he wanted to practice family medicine. “I wanted to be the doctor who touches people and listens to your chest when you’re in the office,” he said.

Commitment to service is what defines Dr. Mills’ life: service to his patients through his practice, service to his profession through KAFP, and service to his country through the military.

Dr. Mills began a long tradition of service through the American Academy of Family Physicians while still a medical student when he was elected to the national board. He was active in both the Oklahoma and Texas state organizations before moving to Kansas. “It’s a way to magnify the efforts you do locally on a person-to-person basis and an opportunity to advocate for health solutions and policies that will affect all patients,” Dr. Mills said.

Through his role at KAFP, Dr. Mills became a proponent of patient-centered medical home, a model of care in which a patient establishes an ongoing relationship with a health care provider who directs and coordinates the patient’s needs across the health care system.

This concept and a renewed interest in family medicine are among the reasons he urges current medical students to seriously consider family medicine as a profession.

“It’s a fantastic time to be going into family medicine,” Dr. Mills said. “After decades of failure to invest in primary care, we’re seeing a renewed commitment to the importance of primary care.”

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www.ruralhealth.kumc.edu
contact aellis2@kumc.edu or (913)588-1228 for more information