



COLIN HACKLEY

Pediatrician Fawn Harrison, who was a member of the College of Medicine's first graduating class, will find just about any excuse to visit the newborns in DeSoto Memorial Hospital.

AT HOME IN ARCADIA

By Ron Hartung

She's a pediatrician who sometimes cries with her patients' families. Gives parents her cell phone number. Goes by "Fawn," not "Dr. Harrison." Gets hugs, watermelons and chocolate-chip cookies from grateful families. Constantly touches her pint-size patients, whether she's listening to their lungs or just pulling a little girl's hair into a ponytail. Has more than two dozen family photos in her office, along with a Mr. Potato Head. Acknowledges God's place in her medical practice. Happily goes home every day to a cattle ranch, a "college-educated cowboy" husband and their kids Madelynn and Lane.

Dr. Fawn Grigsby Harrison, member of the inaugural Class of 2005, is just what legislators had in mind when they created this medical school. She has practiced primary care since 2008 in rural Arcadia, population 6,554 in the 2010 Census. She's among the first wave of alumni who have completed their residencies, gone into practice and begun teaching. As a clerkship faculty member for the Sarasota regional campus, she enthusiastically introduces students to the joys of small-town medicine.

Her husband grew up in Arcadia, east of Sarasota. She didn't, but she says it's nearly identical to her hometown of LaBelle, about an hour away. Even though she did her residency training in mega-Tampa, she remains a fan of rural medicine and rural life. Tucked inside the DeSoto Memorial Hospital Center for Family Health, she says it's a perfect fit.

"It's a super-involved community," Harrison said. "They take care of the hospital. They fight for each other. I like Arcadia."

Hospital CEO Vince Sica says he wishes he could clone Harrison. Mario Leandre, the latest Florida State medical student to have her as a mentor, had no idea he'd get so attached to Arcadia or its pediatrician: "Everyone loves her. She's just awesome."

THE COMMUNITY

Harrison met her husband, Matt, when they were both undergraduates at the University of Florida. He's now working in the cattle business with his father.

"I went to the University of South Florida All Children's Hospital, a wonderful program," she said of her pediatrics residency. "But I chose it based on location, so my husband and I could get married and start our life in Arcadia."

Life is blossoming just as they'd planned.

"My advice to any medical student," she said, "is figure out what you want to do and then go where your life leads you, and not where the residency necessarily leads you."

Granted, not all roads lead to Arcadia. Sica acknowledges it's in one of Florida's poorest counties. But he says it's rich in so many ways. He loves the small-town lifestyle. He loves talking to people he sees on the street. He loves being the football announcer for the DeSoto High School Bulldogs. He loves job candidates who don't ask "Where's the best shopping?" but "How's the turkey hunting around here?" He couldn't believe his luck when Fawn Harrison moved to town.

"I grew up in a rural area," she said. "We appreciated having activities that were not structured. We hunted and we fished, and we just appreciated being outside. People have an appreciation for each other."



A glimpse of downtown Arcadia, population 6,554.

"It's a good place to raise your babies. To me there's not as much trouble to find in a small town, especially if you live in the woods. My 3-year-old daughter asked me, 'Why do we have to have these cows in our pasture?' I said, 'Well, the cows are in the pasture, and that lets us LIVE in the pasture.' She's learning an appreciation for rural life, and I think that's good."

Before work, she drops off her kids at her church, First Baptist: "I am very fortunate. That's another part of a small community – you know the people who care for your children."

Sica mentioned one other benefit of rural medicine: When he hired Harrison, the 49-bed hospital's rural status allowed him to get her enrolled in an academic-loan repayment program.

He has a finely tuned sales pitch for Arcadia life: "You can go to Sarasota and get all the culture you want in 45 minutes, or go to Fort Myers. If you're a pro football fanatic, you've got the Bucs in 90 minutes. If you want to have the 5 acres and a couple of horses, you can do that, too. There are many opportunities here. And financially, our package is as competitive as anyone in the big cities. It's just whether you want this lifestyle."

THE MEDICINE

For Harrison, "this lifestyle" means more time to spend with patients.

"We're not volume-driven," she said. "I have the benefit of being an employee of the hospital and being able to do medicine the way it was taught. There's always push-and-shove: Is it numbers or is it quality? But so far it's quality. The patients benefit. They don't get put on an antibiotic just because it's the easiest thing to do. They get educated about what's the right thing to do."

One stereotype is that small-town patients give their physicians no privacy.

"I think the people in this community are very respectful," Harrison said. "Occasionally you'll get stopped when your kids are screaming and you need to



COLIN HACKLEY

get out of the store, but for the most part everybody in the community is friends, and it works really well.

"They're also extremely generous. They send us pictures, they send flowers, they send plants. When they say thank you in different ways, it's very sweet."

She also denies that small towns are medically boring.

"We joke all the time that Arcadia has more pathology than any large town," she said. "We had a transposition-of-the-great-arteries baby born at the hospital in the spring. That baby's doing fabulously. They shipped him up to All Children's in Tampa."

Mario Leandre, who finished up his first year of med school by spending a three-week Summer Clinical Practicum in Arcadia, was surprised by the medical variety.

"I encountered things like Nutcracker Syndrome, which I'd never heard of, and other rare diseases," the Tampa resident said. "The only thing I expected here was a well-child checkup."

Harrison is on call about every third week, she said, and about once a week she'll come into the hospital after hours to see somebody. She averages maybe one phone call a night.

"It's really not bad," she said. "Nighttime calls are usually the most exciting. It's usually something remarkable. We had congenital-heart-disease babies. We had rectal atresia. We had an epidermolysis bullosa – which is where the top layer of the skin, with any trauma, forms huge blisters and scabs. It's supposed to be super-rare, and it's here."

They also had a brain tumor. Sadly, that baby died.

"I don't think I even knew the family," Harrison said. "They had left a message that the baby wasn't walking straight. The appointment was two weeks out. I said, 'No, no, no, that won't work. Have them come see the walk-in provider.' The walk-in provider came and got me. The baby literally looked like she was drunk. She was 2 years old. I told the mom, 'You're going up to All Children's today.'"

Later Harrison got a phone call from the mother: "'My baby's going in for surgery. She has a brain tumor.' She and I just cried.

"Her baby fought a long fight, but she didn't have very good odds. She passed away."

During those cases especially, her faith is invaluable.

"We have a really close-knit Baptist church," Harrison said. "It helps. When you need support, it's there. In medicine, you know you can't fix everything. So without somebody's help, it just doesn't work. God is a huge part of our practice here.

"Each night when I pray with my little girl, I say, 'Please take care of the babies that I take care of.'"





COLIN HACKLEY

At DeSoto Memorial, Dr. Harrison can take time for a conference with a patient's family.

THE EDUCATION

Harrison has wanted to be a physician for as long as she can remember. The education she got at Florida State, she said, prepared her well.

"I think the one-on-one training is an unbelievable learning opportunity compared to traditional students, who usually are at the back of the group, trying to see what's going on, and asking the next-closest person," she said.

Like other alumni, she admits she disliked the role-playing involved in the Doctoring course – but now has a whole new appreciation for it. "You use SO MANY of those skills when you get into medicine," she said. "One of the things I remember from Doctoring is if you have bad news, you just tell them. You don't try to beat around the bush. You don't try to hide it in different words. You don't try to make it sound better. Just tell them and let them digest it. And then answer questions. To have some guidance on how to give bad news is extremely helpful because many of the older physicians here who have a lot more experience – they'll tell you that they weren't told how to do this, and it's awful, it's really awful."

Now Harrison is a teacher herself. During Leandre's practicum, she included him in all her patient interactions

and praised his progress. Already trained as a pharmacist, he has no plans to become a pediatrician – but he clearly enjoyed his time there.

"He's a wonderful medical student," Harrison said. "He's very well educated. He works great with families. He plays with the kids – which is what pediatrics is about." Sounding slightly disappointed, she added, "He didn't get peed on."

For her as well as Leandre, one of the best parts of the College of Medicine's approach is the teamwork and collegiality.

"We benefited hugely from that," she said of the Class of 2005. "We helped each other succeed, whether it was boards or clinical rotations. The College of Medicine is a good home for anybody, because you learn to be a good person and a good physician."

And, maybe, a good rural physician.

"I think I have classmates that are still in fellowships," Harrison said. "Their life has not started yet, in my opinion. Whereas if you short-track it and go out into rural practice, your life is more full.

"To me," said the smiling pediatrician in Arcadia, "it's more rewarding."