

# SMALL TOWNS, ENORMOUS OPPORTUNITIES

By Ron Hartung

It's not always big-city medical students who cringe at the phrase "Rural Track." At first even Marianna native Philip Burke feared that he might never encounter interesting cases there. He loved Marianna, population about 6,300, but he was concerned he'd be paddling into a medical backwater.

Medical whitewater is more like it. Burke, a fourth-year College of Medicine student who spent last year in Marianna, says he got more clinical experience than some classmates at other regional campuses:

- He delivered a baby on Day One of his OB-GYN rotation at Jackson Hospital.
- He admitted a patient on Day One of his internal-medicine rotation.
- He *performed* half of the 30 required major operations on his surgery rotation. Students at most medical schools primarily assist or observe.
- He heard from a classmate at one regional campus that she'd done only three sutures; he did nearly 50 on his own and assisted with nearly 30 more.

In a medical school that prizes hands-on experience, Rural Track students may have the most experienced hands of all.

What's more, Burke got to follow some patients from one rotation to another. And he saw medicine in a whole new light when his grandfather entered the hospital.

For some students, the Rural Track experience – whether in Marianna, migrant-rich Immokalee or elsewhere – is a perfect fit. Robin Albritton, who grew up in Marianna and returned there this summer to practice, calls rural medicine an unbeatable learning opportunity.

"You've got a group of physicians who don't have to teach residents. Their only person to teach is that medical student," said Albritton, Class of 2007, who did his surgery rotation and an elective rotation at Jackson Hospital. "There were a lot of times when I finished up a case in the OR, and the internist would come down and say, 'Look, I've got a sick patient in the ICU and I want to teach you something.'

"When I started my residency at TMH, I felt like I'd already completed a year of residency in Marianna. It was a huge advantage. If you're really motivated and want to learn a lot, the Rural Track is an amazing place."

**Komal D'Souza, then a third-year medical student, examines a patient at the Isabel Collier Read Medical**