



Third-year student Phillip Burke, left, with patient in Marianna.

'TOP OF THE TOTEM POLE'

When Philip Burke was in sixth grade, his teacher's husband – Marianna physician Richard Goff – talked to the class about careers in medicine. Last year, Burke worked every Tuesday at Goff's family-medicine practice, which gave him a chance to see the same patients multiple times.

Originally, Burke had planned to spend his third year in a big city at one of the regional campuses. He's glad he reconsidered.

Marianna may not be large, but Jackson County itself has 40,000 people, and Jackson Hospital is right off Interstate 10 and U.S. Highways 90 and 231. There are few hospitals between Panama City and Tallahassee, so Jackson has no shortage of patients.

"Here, a third-year medical student is on top of the totem pole," Burke said.

One of the reasons Burke decided on Marianna was that his grandparents lived there and he was concerned it could be their last year. In fact, it was.

"I ended up my first week into my surgery rotation admitting my grandfather from the ER," Burke said. "He had a small-bowel obstruction and had surgery, had complications, a massive heart attack, had pneumonia, was ventilated, cycled up and down. He had a pretty rough course.

"But I was very fortunate that I was able to be here, and Dr. Steven Spence" – the clerkship administrator for the Rural Track – "actually was his doctor."

It was difficult at times to straddle the line between medical student and grandson, but he's glad he had the chance.

"I wasn't making the decisions, but I knew his chart inside and out, and I knew every decision that was made," Burke said. "It was helpful for the family because there was a lot I could explain.

"I had faith in Dr. Spence. He's a really good doctor. I was able to bounce things off of him, and ask him, 'Can we try this? Would you want to do that? Why or why not?'

"It was good to be able to know that everything was being done that could be done, and know that there was no exaggerated effort. We gave my grandfather as many chances as you could really give somebody before you say, 'Enough is enough.'"

His grandfather died in March. Five weeks later his grandmother, who had Alzheimer's, also died. Their grandson was never far away.