



The Wrong Store, Led to the Right Job

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“This is the fullest scope of family practice that I’ve ever experienced since my days working at Patients First in Tallahassee, said Dr. Alexander. It makes this experience that much more exciting and special.”

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, serendipity is literary the unexpected occurrence of or faculty for finding valuable or agreeable things that are not sought. An aptitude for making a desirable discovery by accident.

That’s exactly how FAFP Past President Dr. Christienne Alexander explains her leave of absence from Florida State University College of Medicine, to live and run a small, rural practice in Marfa, Texas, located in the far western part of state near the Mexican border.

“I was staying in a little Airbnb in Valentine, Texas about 35 miles from Marfa, on my way back from a trip to Tucson, Arizona. I decided on Valentine because of its name and the fact that it sold itself for its view of the stars,” said Dr. Alexander. “I had never heard of Marfa prior to Valentine and when I arrived in Valentine, I realized that I was all alone in the middle of nowhere and immediately started googling nearest cities to get food and gas, and Marfa popped up.”

“The following day, the owner of the Airbnb suggested I check out Valentine’s little church that had been newly renovated. So, I did. I went inside and sat in a pew near the front of the church praying for guidance and a big sign that I wouldn’t miss for the next chapter of my life. It was

a really emotional moment, as I left the church just thinking about everything we had all been through over the past year.”

Unbeknownst to Dr. Alexander, her serendipitous moment—her “big sign”—would soon come as she drove out of quaint Valentine, Texas onward to Marfa—the closest town in her Google search.

As she slowly drove into the small town of Marfa, she came across an art gallery named “Wrong Store” and it piqued her interest. She parked, went inside and had a conversation that would change the direction of her future, albeit, for a while.

“When I arrived in Marfa, seeing that art gallery and the 15-minute conversation I had with the owner, was the answer to my prayers,” said Dr. Alexander. “We were talking about her husband’s art and various random things when she asked what I did for a living and I told her I’m a family doctor. She then asked if I wanted a job in her town. Her friend owned the medical clinic and was taking a sabbatical to France with his Parisienne wife and their teenaged children. I gave her my phone number and asked her to share with the clinic owner. I grabbed a bite to eat and was heading out when she called and said the clinic

owner wanted to meet!”

“Everything I needed to learn about the position was provided in a 45-minute conversation I had with Don Culbertson, the clinic’s owner. I left knowing this was something I had to do! It was the sign I had asked for. I put in a one-year leave of absence with FSU, and four months later to the very day, I arrived in Marfa to run the Marfa Country Clinic.”

Growing up in Orlando, Dr. Alexander admits working in rural medicine wasn’t on her radar. She had lived and worked in densely populated cities all her life. One thing she was familiar with is working with the underserved.

“My family was the very definition of ‘underserved’ – we didn’t have health insurance or money to go to the doctor,” she recalled. “I knew that I always wanted to give back to people like me who didn’t have access to health care, no matter what the setting. Now, the setting for me, just happens to be a very rural clinic in far West Texas. Not only am I in love with serving the underserved, but I am also in love with rural medicine.”

In her all-woman-run clinic and the only staff physician, Dr. Alexander says she cares for patients of all ages from two weeks to a 102-year-old not only who live in Marfa, but surrounding towns ranging from 30 minutes away to a two-hour drive. While most are Spanish speaking only, mainly from Mexico, many have generations of families born and raised in Marfa. “It gives me a chance to practice my Spanish-speaking skills.”

On the job for a few months now, Dr. Alexander says she starts her day with well adult exams, followed by a variety of focused and chronic care visits, and ending the day with annual well-child checks and telemedicine visits. She performs a host of procedures from skin biopsies to joint injections to laceration repairs—sometimes several procedures before lunch.

Once a week, she attends to patients in the county jail for everything from help with trouble sleeping to GI issues and psychiatric concerns. Plus, she makes house visits to those who are bedridden or have mobility issues. At home, she tends to her chickens, dines out with friends, attends an art opening, or helps with local events.

“Some days are really hard. I’ve had patients who aren’t thrilled to have a new provider caring for them. It’s the unfamiliar. Other days are hard because of the types of

conditions you see and the amount of care that some patients need. But in the long run, the feedback I’ve received from the community is positive. My patients know I’m there for them. I can have a conversation with them, listen to them.”

“I’ve been drawn to that my whole career – giving people time. Our system doesn’t allow for that most times, but luckily out here, somehow it does. At the end of the day, I know I am making a difference.”

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Dr. Alexander credits every part of her life and career for preparing her for this work. From being raised in a family that didn’t always have health care to being trained by a medical school whose mission is rural health and serving the underserved, to becoming the medical director of an urgent care/family practice center right out of residency, and the many global health trips she has taken.

“What I love about living here is just how simple it is in so many ways,” says Dr.

Alexander. “I love the sense of community—everyone takes care of each other. There’s a quote in a book that I’m reading about Marfa that says, ‘When you know everyone, everyone matters,’ and that’s exactly how it feels to live here.”

“Working here and the people I’m treating, reminds me of my own family. I see my Puerto Rican grandmother in the older Hispanic women that I care for and I see my mom and dad who ran restaurants their whole lives struggling to meet ends meet, bringing their kids in for care.”

“My move to Marfa is temporary as of right now,” said Dr. Alexander. “I took a one-year leave of absence from the FSU College of Medicine to run this clinic while the owners are on their one-year sabbatical. It’s truly an opportunity of a lifetime to be able to serve this community while still having a position at the College of Medicine. I am grateful to so many people who helped make it possible.”

“It’s been an amazing few months living here in Marfa. I’ve been put in this town by the grace of God and while I’m still trying to figure out my path and everything I’m supposed to be doing, I know that I was put here for a reason. I remind myself of that every single day.”

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