
THE CARE GIVERS: CARE BEFORE COMPENSATION

Michael Degnan Puts Patients First

By [Monivette Cordeiro](#)

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Dr. Michael Degnan has three large desks in his office, but even that amount of space can't control the paperwork chaos of a busy family physician.

Among the mounds of patient reports and medical textbooks, Degnan keeps reminders of the two things closest to his heart: framed photos of his wife, Mai, and their three children.



CALVIN KNIGHT / THE LEDGER
Dr. Michael Degnan

Strewn around the records on his desk are colorful thank-you notes from his patients. It takes him a while, but when he collects them all he makes several stacks.

"When you know a patient appreciates you, that's the best award," he says. "I take all the notes and put them in a binder, so that when I'm retired I can go through them slowly. They're things that get locked in that wimpy heart of mine."

Being a doctor wasn't Degnan's first choice for a career. After he ditched the idea of becoming a rock star, he decided to join the military after graduating high school. His brother, who already was in the military, persuaded him to go into medicine like their father, Dr. Edward Degnan, an oral surgeon at the Veterans' Administration Hospital in

St. Petersburg.

His decision to become a doctor was cemented at 18 when he volunteered for hospice and and comforted a man dying of skin cancer.

"All I had to do was sit with him and get stuff if he needed it," he says. "I remember sitting there and thinking, 'This is what I'm supposed to be doing for the rest of my life.' Moments like that made it easier to forget the struggle of medical school."

Degnan, 56, went on to receive a bachelor's degree in clinical chemistry from the University of South Florida, then graduated from the USF College of Medicine in 1986. He met his wife when he sat behind her in a biochemistry class. Mai Degnan, who was studying to be a medical technologist, liked his meticulous notes.

They dated long-distance while he completed a three-year residency at Tallahassee Regional Medical Center. He reeled her in, he said, with the letters he would send her every day until they got married three years later.

In 1989, they moved to Haines City and Degnan began practicing at the Green Clinic. He can still remember the day he attended to a migrant mother who brought in her sick baby. The baby had on an old sweater wrapped around as a diaper.

"It was terrible," he says. "After that patient, I told my wife I needed to do something."

Four years later, he began offering a free clinic once a month for children whose parents didn't have insurance. For his volunteer work, he was named the 1996 Florida Family Physician of the Year by the Florida Academy of Family Physicians.

In the 20 years that Linda Pilkington, director of community and government relations at Heart of Florida Regional Medical Center, has known Degnan, he's always been attentive to his patients and ready to volunteer for his community. "He's always been involved in providing care for the needy, especially to those without insurance," she says. "He's had a great impact on a lot of individuals who otherwise wouldn't have gotten any medical care."

He left the Green Clinic in 2000 to open his own clinic with his wife. She has the business savvy, so she runs the office for Degnan Family Medicine in Davenport while also working as a medical technologist.

"She's my inspiration," he says. "I really don't think I would have opened my own business if she hadn't encouraged it. It sounds like a hokey Hallmark card, but she really is my wife, business partner, biggest critic and best friend."

Degnan joined the Parkview Outreach Medical Clinic in Haines City as its medical director in 2009. The clinic, which gets about 200 patients a month, gives free care and medicine to adults below

200 percent of the federal poverty income guidelines who are uninsured.

The clinic has two paid staff members and the rest are volunteers. Some volunteers come and go, but three, including Degnan, are consistently active, says Patricia Kent, the clinic's director and a nurse practitioner.

"He's easy to approach and has a very good bedside manner, which is important for a doctor. He's just a nice guy."

His one hobby is music.

Every year, Degnan sends out about 25 copies of his own instrumental music on CDs. A one-man band, he records himself playing every instrument and puts the tracks together. He holds off on the vocals, he says, because, "I took an oath in medical school to do no harm. If people hear me sing, they'll show up at my house, vomiting."

Although he treats things like common colds and skin infections at the clinic, Degnan and the other volunteers face many tough cases that shouldn't be in the free clinic. Recently, a man came in the clinic diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, but Degnan says he thinks he was misdiagnosed and has some other type of neuromuscular disease.

"It's beyond the scope of our practice so I referred him to a hospital," he said. "He didn't go because of the cost and came back asking for help. It's disheartening."

Despite the drawbacks, Degnan enjoys being with the volunteers and the patients.

"All the people at that clinic just have the biggest hearts. When I retire, my plan is to work there until I become so demented they tell me I can't come and help anymore."

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