



RhPAP Board member Ashley Woytuik, right, enjoyed learning about the work 2022 Rhapsody Award winner Kim Ruether does in Fairview. Woytuik presented the Healthcare Heroes award last year to Ruether, and is pictured along with RhPAP rural consultant, Holly Handfield. — Photo by Tyler Harke

Ashley Woytuik has practised as a registered nurse for 12 years, and has worked in an emergency setting for a decade. She is the newest addition to the nine-member RhPAP Board of Directors, after joining in 2022 as a public board member. Rural Health Beat coordinator, Lorena Franchuk, recently chatted with Ms. Woytuik to learn about her passion for rural nursing and how she views her new role as an opportunity to bring a front-line health professional's perspective to the RhPAP Board.

LF: Where and when did you start nursing?

AW: I did my nursing degree in Yellowknife. They have a partner program with the University of Victoria, so I was fortunate enough to be able to do my education there. I wasn't born [in Yellowknife], but I grew up there from the time I was about 10 years old.

LF: Are you practising as a nurse now and in what capacity?

AW: I'm the clinical coordinator in the emergency department in Grande Prairie. So that means I'm like the gap filler. So sometimes I'm teaching, sometimes I am planning for staffing. Sometimes I am working on bigger projects within the building and then sometimes I'm doing patient care, because that's what we need. I love what I do, because I get to continue to do patient care and stay up to date on all the interesting stuff and best practices while keeping my feet [on the front lines].

LF: What prompted you to become a nurse?

AW: I wanted a career that was going to be challenging and something where I could use my brain. I wanted something where I could be helping people. I just kind of fell into nursing.

LF: Why did you choose to nurse in a rural environment?

AW: I was in Yellowknife for a year before we moved, and that's pretty rural nursing—not maybe compared to some areas in Alberta, but it's pretty rural and it certainly has its challenges. [We] are affected by weather and geography for so much of what we do. Particularly on a foggy day, our patients don't go anywhere so sometimes it's a struggle to get patients to the care that they need and [back home to their family and community again.]

LF: What do you find most challenging in rural nursing?

AW: I think the biggest challenge is the scope of things you are expected to know. I think it applies to most emergency departments, but the farther out you are from the big centres the more you are expected to deal with what lands on your doorstep, so to speak. You can't [suddenly] call a specialist to come over or [ask an additional] five nurses [to come] because

you might not have that many available.

LF: Why did you choose to join the RhPAP Board of Directors?

AW: I wanted to be able to make change and improve rural health care. It felt like a perfect opportunity to use my clinical lens and experience to make a positive impact.

LF: How does being a practising nurse and an RhPAP director help you influence rural medicine?

AW: I really like being able to be the voice of nursing at the table, especially front-line nursing. We've been through a lot these last two years and having that nursing perspective at the table helps to bring the important issues up.

LF: May is a month to celebrate nurses with National Nursing Week May 8-14. What advice do you have for anyone who is interested in becoming a rural nurse?

AW: I would say go and do it. Don't be afraid of it, learn as much as you can while you're doing it, and make sure that you love what you're doing.

LF: Do you think practising in a rural setting has helped you become a different kind of nurse?

AW: Oh, absolutely. I think that anybody who has worked rural or is planning to work rural - your ability to be resourceful changes.... I mean, resourceful in problem solving.... You're very conscious of how you utilize your resources, because they're often limited. So, you're not going to necessarily send your only ambulance crew on a transfer for patients if you don't need to in the middle of the night. It's kind of one those bigger picture things.

LF: What influence does a rural nurse have on health care in their community?

AW: Oh, that's a good question. I don't know, I just try and do a good job every day. I try and share that broad perspective with everybody that I'm working with. For problem solving it's 'well we could do this, but it makes us give up this resource. Or we could try and send this patient back to a more rural community, but it puts them at risk of not being able to

care for their other needs.' It's trying to spread that knowledge around from a broad high level perspective to the front-line staff. I think it makes a difference on how we all work together in the system.... When you build that shared understanding of how we're all working on actually the same problem, people are more likely to work together.

LF: What has been the most fulfilling part of your career thus far as a nurse?

AW: Just knowing that some of the things that we do every day actually does impact the patients and their families. Knowing that I was able to take away that person's pain with the medication or make them breathe a little bit better, or whatever the case is, that little bit of care does actually matter and it goes a long way.

LF: What has been the most fulfilling part of your career as a RhPAP board member?

AW: That one's a little trickier because it's only been a year, I guess. There's been tons of work being done, [but] the staff is doing the heavy lifting on a lot of it. As a board member, honestly, the best thing that I've done so far, I had the privilege to go out and present the 2022 RhPAP Rhapsody Health-care Heroes Award last summer in Fairview. That was amazing, it was so wonderful to see the community come together and they just absolutely adored the award recipient. You could tell in the room that she made a big impact in health care, she made a big impact in people's lives. It was really neat to be part of that.

LF: Why is rural health care so important to you?

AW: Well, coming from somewhere more rural I just really understand the access to health care is so important.... You should be able to have high quality health care regardless of where you are, the weather, or whatever is happening that day. So [these roles] give me an opportunity to try and get that for people.