



Winnipeg born Dr. Gavin Parker always expected to work in an urban setting until he experienced rural medicine during an RhPAP post secondary event early on in his medical training. Dr. Parker and his wife Jennifer have raised their three children, Mia, Garrett, and Sebastian, in the Southern Alberta community. — Photo supplied by Dr. Gavin Parker

An opportunity to ski for free helped change the career trajectory of a second-year medical student, now chair of the RhPAP Board of Directors.

Dr. Gavin Parker originally had an eye on a neurosurgery career. However, after spending an enlightening weekend in Hinton learning about rural medicine and skiing in Jasper as part of an RhPAP-sponsored post-secondary event, the Winnipeg-born physician began to carve a new path.

“That kind of really started my love affair, so to speak, with rural medicine, rural healthcare and, more importantly, rural lifestyle,” says Dr. Parker, who has served as an RhPAP board member since 2013.

“I wasn’t from a small town, so learning that you could have a very fulfilling existence living and raising your family in a small town was eye-opening,” the family physician recalls while taking a break between patients.

The University of Alberta student attended the University of Calgary’s Rural Family Medicine Residency Program, followed by general practitioner anesthesia training. As a medical student and locum, Dr. Parker worked as far north as High Level, down to Milk River in the south, and many rural Alberta places in between.

Today, Dr. Parker practises at The Associate Clinic in Pincher Creek, the town of about 3,900 people with a service area of about 10,000 residents and is located just over an hour away from the U.S. border.

Dr. Parker is grateful that he was able to experience rural life early on.

“We don’t know what we don’t know,” admits the family physician, who also serves as president of the Society of Rural Physicians of Canada.

“If the only time you have ever spent in a small town is getting gas on your way to the ski hill or whatever, then you don’t really know what it’s like in those smaller communities. I didn’t know what it was like until I lived and worked in those areas. And, yeah, and it’s quite something.”

Crisscrossing the province early on in his career, Dr. Parker began to appreciate the wide scope rural medicine offers someone like himself who loves to problem solve.

He also realized his interactions with patients would be much more limited as a neurosurgeon or other specialist than that of a rural family physician.

“By the time you are in residency, you are pretty exclusively focused on that speciality. As a neurosurgeon, you are not going to deal with a pregnant patient or kids again unless you are a pediatric surgeon. If you are a gynecologist, you are never going to deal with men again. So, there is a huge swath of people you will never see.”

He credits RhPAP for showcasing the diversity of rural medical careers and hopes the organization he now leads will continue as Alberta’s biggest rural healthcare cheerleader, not only for physicians but other health professions as well.

“We know from the decades of data at RhPAP that the earlier and longer that students are exposed to rural medicine, the more likely they are to go into it.

“I would be the prototypical example of that as they got to me within my first few months of medical school and gave me opportunity to dip a toe in the water, get some exposure and repeated connections.”

Dr. Parker now exudes the same rural charm that initially wooed him and his wife, Jennifer, a French immersion teacher.

He talks proudly about raising his three children in the community and the volunteer work he and Jennifer do three times a week as instructors for the Barracuda Judo Club.

“I love the fact that I’ll leave here today at 4 p.m. Our dojo (judo training space) is literally a 60-second drive from here, so I’ll drive there, I’ll have my judogi (judo uniform) on by 4:05, and I’ll be tossing kids around by 4:15. It’s great—I’m not wasting time in traffic.”



Switching from physician to judo instructor in a matter of minutes is easy for Dr. Gavin Parker, RhPAP's chair of the Board of Directors, in the community of Pincher Creek.

— Photo supplied by Dr. Gavin Parker

He easily fills that "non commuting" time outdoors, helping at the local distillery he co-owns, mentoring medical students as a preceptor, and fulfilling other roles in and outside of his community.

"My wife and I built our dream house in Pincher Creek," says Dr. Parker of the community that has become his home over the past 15 years.

"I've spent my career to date in Pincher Creek and this is where I will retire from medicine."