

COUNTRY ROADS

Highlighting Champions
of Rural West Virginia

SUMMER 2023



Our vision is simple: Equitable access to healthcare for all West Virginians.



The State Office of Rural Health, inspired by our motto – **Partnerships, Quality, Service** – implements programs and promotes best-practice models through collaboration to address rural healthcare.

Working with healthcare groups, communities, and agencies the office manages federal rural health funds, monitors the state's healthcare delivery system, and works to **recruit and retain healthcare providers.**



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Health promoter gives people the tools they need to be healthy.



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Medical student secures funding for fitness park in hometown.

STORIES BY JEAN HARDIMAN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS GOSSES

ROANE COUNTY PHOTOGRAPHY
BY RICK LEE, 2021

PORCH TALK with Stephanie Moore

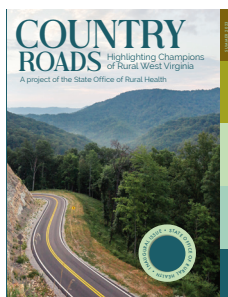
Director, West Virginia State
Office of Rural Health

Welcome to Country Roads, a magazine that puts the spotlight on the amazing people who make up this beautiful state.

Every community in West Virginia is unique in its geography, demographics, and culture; each is molded by our history in different ways. Even though the mountains sometimes separate us, the roads serve as arteries that feed the beating heart of what it means to be a West Virginian surmounting obstacles through kindness, humor, and a willingness to come together in strength.

In this issue, we take a look at an innovative approach to preparing surgeons for rural practice and how a grassroots effort is tackling health issues in Logan County. We visit a dynamic change-maker in Bluefield, a Roane County hospital emphasizing healthy lifestyles, a doctor dedicated to hometown health, and Madison's new fitness park.

Let's visit with folks making a difference in the lives of their neighbors and discover the good works happening throughout the state. Whether it's four-lane, gravel, or dirt, come with us as we travel the country roads that make us uniquely wonderful.



ON THE COVER

Chief Logan State Park
Photography is courtesy of the
West Virginia Department
of Tourism.

WELCOME



Darryl Cannady: 'Be active about your health'

**Health promoter
helps neighbors
stay on top
of their health**

Story by
Jean Hardiman

The two years leading up to the age of 50 and the two years that followed were stressful for Darryl Cannady. It's not that anything terrible happened to him during that time. It's what he knew might happen, because neither his father nor his older brother lived past 51. "My father died of a massive heart attack at 51," Cannady said. "He had just retired. My mother was going to retire the next year." Then his brother, who struggled with alcohol, died at the age of 48.

"When I turned 52, the stress went away," said the now 60-year-old, who is executive director and founder of South Central Educational Development Inc. (SCED). But it fueled a fire for him.

As a longtime champion of health for the Black and rural communities in the mountains of McDowell County, Cannady encourages practices that take some of the fear and guesswork out of maintaining your health: Know your family history and see your doctor regularly.



Hasanah Malik is the director of Youth In Me, a program working to develop entrepreneurship with young people. Malik is working as a leader with South Central Educational Development. She develops all natural holistic drinks that help the body by providing vitamins and nutrients.

Having spent some 30 years doing public health initiatives that address everything from HIV to breast and prostate cancer to hepatitis and more, his biggest goals are to reach as many neighbors as he can in McDowell County, encourage them to be aware of their health status, and give them easy access to screenings.

He just wants to give people tools.

"Factories, bad water, black lung - there are so many causes of death in West Virginia," Cannady said. "When I talk to people, it's about looking into family history. That's where your risk comes from. A lot of times, you don't know about it until the damage is done."

Cannady has learned from 30 years of projects and initiatives. Today, he serves his community mainly out of two locations - the South Central Educational Development Inc. facility in Bluefield, which he describes as a community center or hub for multiple efforts to address healthy living in southern West Virginia, and through his restaurant, Bennady's, in Northfork, where he not only serves up oxtail, curried chicken, and homemade ice cream, but offers some healthcare programs as well,



Doctors are not mind-readers and need to hear from you as the patient to understand your health concerns.

Darryl Cannady

knowing that more people are likely to show up at a restaurant than a clinic.

"There's no stigma attached," Cannady said. "You can stop in a restaurant and get a vaccination, and nobody knows."

His most successful program lately has been the Making Health Happen Community Health Screening Events, which bring together a variety of vendors in one place to offer free screenings.

"Every time we do it, it grows a little bit more," Cannady said.



Darryl Cannady serves his community mainly out of two locations – his restaurant in Northfork, WV, and the South Central Educational Development Inc. facility, pictured above, in Bluefield, WV.

“The main message I would like communities to hear: Be active about health,” he said. “You can be healthy and you can change your health outcomes if you check your health status, go to the doctor, have blood work, check out those pains, and don’t be afraid to talk to your provider about issues you are experiencing.

“Doctors are not mind-readers and need to hear from you as the patient to understand your health concerns, aches and pains, and changes in your body. Get your blood pressure checked. Check for diabetes and glucose. Screen for cancers. It is the small things that can change your health outcomes.”

Cannady’s success in public health initiatives in Southern West Virginia is not because of a prestigious medical degree or career background in a doctor’s office or hospital. It comes from loving the people of McDowell County, the place where he spent his childhood summers.

His journey had some twists, but prepared him all the same.

A childhood in the city

Cannady grew up far from McDowell County, surrounded by towering buildings instead of the

Appalachian Mountains. His childhood home: Brooklyn, New York. But his parents were from West Virginia, so he was no stranger to the Mountain State’s beautiful hills and people.

“I grew up in Brooklyn during school months and in West Virginia during the summers,” he said.

The youngest of four children, Cannady said he had a “normal childhood living in the city.”

As a youth, he had strong friendships with his peers and undeniable leadership skills that would help shape his future.

“I was a bit older-acting than others and began DJ’ing at the age of 11 and continued until I was 22. I developed a dance troop when I was 17 with friends. We performed at local clubs,” he said.

His work experience hit a lot of different areas. He graduated from Food and Maritime Trades High School in Manhattan. Then he attended the Institute of Audio Technology and worked in New York for a while.

“I had no career in health,” he said. “My degree is in audio engineering. I then went back to school

to get my degree in business management, with computer science as a minor. My first job was in a credit card processing center in New York. I was the merchant service manager.”

He also worked as the head salad chef at Joe Allen Restaurant in New York and at Citibank in New York. Eventually, he relocated to West Virginia to take care of his grandmother. He said the Mountain State always felt like home.

“To tell the truth, I was working for a nonprofit in McDowell County as the computer specialist,” he said. He was asked to fill in and attend a training session in order to meet the requirements for an HIV grant the organization received.

“I met the people and heard the struggles with communities of color and HIV prevention and was kind of thrust into the role of prevention educator,” he said.

As a prevention educator, he jumped in with both feet.

Fighting for rural health

He became the director of South Central AIDS Network in 1992 and the executive director of South Central Educational Development Inc. in 1999. As executive director today, Cannady is responsible for day-to-day operations in their center — which houses a computer lab, training center, auditorium, full kitchen, pantry, and digital recording studio.

He oversees a small staff, grant acquisitions and financials, reporting and building community relationships. But it doesn’t stop there when you’re in a small community organization trying to meet people where they are. He also organizes opportunities to build relationships and share community resources, develops innovative programming and curricula, collects and evaluates data in the context of rural communities, and much more.

Working for social justice

During his years as the AIDS Network director,

Cannady was mostly providing education pertaining to HIV/AIDS in communities of color and was approached by other agencies that requested this education for communities of all races. Meanwhile, he started meeting others with innovative thought processes, he said.

One of them was Frankie Patton, executive director of Big People In Action in Carretta, West Virginia.

“This was the beginning of my journey into the social justice arena,” he said. “She educated me in the local politics and issues of McDowell County. I made a conscious decision to increase our presence in the county providing prevention education as well as working more with local resources that were open to HIV prevention (which were few, due to the stigma associated with the disease).

“Frankie nominated me to be on the board of the Appalachian Community Fund, a social justice fund that funded central Appalachian region, Eastern Kentucky, Eastern Tennessee, Southwest Virginia and all of West Virginia. This experience was a total eye-opener for me.”

As funders of grassroots organizations, the board reviewed proposals. And the proposals he read raised his awareness of the injustice in the

central Appalachian region, which became a driver for his work locally. They ranged from environment and safety issues to immigration in the mountains, community and economic justice, farming practices, and a host of other issues that communities were working to change.

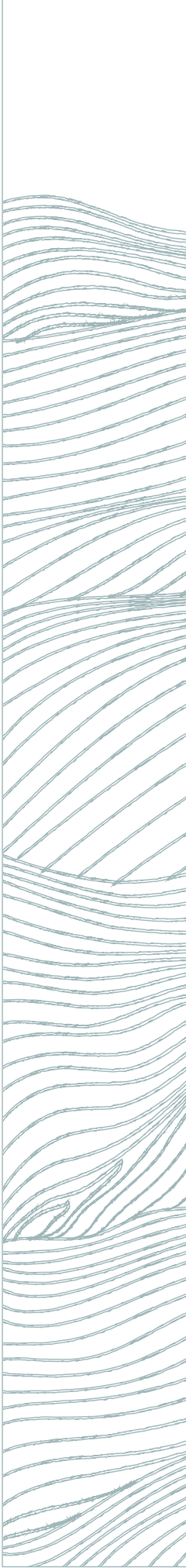
“I felt if providing a small grant would move the needle in these communities, the fraction of time spent reading their proposal was well worth my time,” he said.

He also served on statewide groups in West

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“You can be healthy and you can change your health outcomes if you check your health status, go to the doctor, have blood work, check out those pains, and don’t be afraid to talk to your provider about issues you are experiencing.”

Darryl Cannady





At his restaurant Bennady's, Cannady encourages people to stop in and receive a vaccination.

Virginia, Mississippi and New York to address HIV as well as assisting with an HIV support project through the Mississippi Urban Research Center at Jackson State University. Also, Cannady was a board member of the Funding Exchange-NY, an organization providing national funding for social justice issues, from LGBTQ to international issues of equality.

The list of initiatives that Cannady has been involved with over the past few decades is extensive but includes the "Minority Health Disparities in Rural Appalachia" conference series in 2002, which followed a hepatitis B outbreak and promoted testing for not only hepatitis B, but also HIV and AIDS. Prevention, treatment, and care were three areas on which they focused. Another community-based education initiative was SISTA in 2009, focusing on HIV in Black women to extend the education about the disease. At that time, men were usually the main focus of HIV education.

Cannady also worked with the WV Department of Health and Human Resources on a school-based education initiative about HIV transmission. "We've been doing HIV testing since 2004," he said.

"We try to identify the counties in need and we provide services to everyone, with an emphasis on people of color," he said.

South Central programs target the following

counties: McDowell, Mercer, Raleigh, Summers, and Wyoming.

"After researching prostate cancer, we developed 'Us Too,' providing three workshops targeting men in the Black community. We provided information and kits to help them navigate the health system to get testing for indicators of Prostate Specific Antigen (PSA). This program is still available by request," he said.

In 2012, he helped organize Tell A Friend, a program to encourage women across three counties to get their mammograms, providing free mammograms to rural women in need. In 2015, he helped found a hepatitis C testing program in McDowell County as well.

In the middle of his healthcare efforts, in 2014, Cannady was even mayor of Keystone, West Virginia, for just five months. "Don't like politics," was all he had to say about that.

'Making Health Happen'

His newest effort is the Making Health Happen Community Health Screening Events. "We at South Central began looking at health data for Southern West Virginia, along with opioid data," Cannady said. "We took a good, long look at McDowell County."

In many health issues, the county has ranked 55

out of 55. McDowell County has a high rate of minorities as well, and few resources. When coal mining operations left the county, so did much of its population and resources, Cannady said.

"This county suffers with the highest rate of chronic diseases and health disparities, as well as a high burden of the social determinants of health, starting with housing, transportation, and access to quality health care," Cannady said. "Looking at this data, it seemed that there needed to be a way to get health screenings and care to people that struggled with access to care. However, this was the tip of the iceberg."

As he points out, when you live in a poor area such as McDowell County, "You can have a million dollars, but you're as poor as everyone else because we have no resources. A million dollars is not going to bring you a grocery store or local healthcare providers."

So Cannady brought to the table a resource to which he had personal ties — the restaurant that he runs in Northfork, Bennady's.

"SCED wanted to see if we brought the health screening to the community, would they come, would they screen, would they seek additional treatment and care for identified diseases?" he said. The answer is yes.

"At the first event, we hosted nine vendors, and approximately 20 community residents attended," he said. "The services offered were COVID-19 vaccines, A1C screenings, HIV testing, hep C screenings, clean water, youth services, substance abuse (information), and Narcan distribution."

As the months passed, they held the event in different locations, with more people coming. "One year later, we hosted this event in Welch, West Virginia, at the Jack Caffrey Arts and Cultural Center," he said. "We recruited 50 vendors and hosted 202 community residents. Screenings increased to include clinical breast exams, glucose screenings, vision impaired services, HIV and hepatitis C screenings, medical health plan signups, youth services, foster care services, and much more."

Community participation is up

"This was approximately a 573% increase in community participation, which was a direct indication that these mobile services are very much



A shout-out to those who have helped

Cannady offers thanks to many who have helped him fight for health in West Virginia, including his parents, Joann and Ben Cannady, and his siblings Michelle, Sandra, and Donald Cannady.

"Over my years of health education work, there are some very key people in my life that I felt always supported my efforts in changing health outcomes, and I would like to thank them: Drema Mace, Patti Crawford, Haylee Heinsberg-CRCH and SEAHEC-WVSOM, Marcus Wilkes-SAULS, Nils Haynes, and Gaye Evans-ACF."

He also thanks his core planning group for Making Health Happen: Annetta Tiller of UniCare WV Health Plan, Sharon Waldon, Keisha Saunders at Tug River Clinic, Tammy Fleshman of Mountain Heart, Frances McNulty of Reconnect McDowell, Deloris Johnson at the Jack Caffrey Arts and Cultural Center, Dewey Houck at Mullins Opportunity Center, Michelle Hargrave for office assistance, Bryan Dalton for office maintenance, and of course, the SCED board members.

needed and taken advantage of by community residents. To date, we have hosted 10 health screening events in the following counties: McDowell, Mercer, Mingo, and Wyoming, with requests from Logan and Summers counties to host this health screening event."

Based on data collected, they've provided over 350 screening services to a population of over 1,235 community residents. And the beauty of this type of event, Cannady said, is that it can be scaled up or down to meet the needs of each community.

"The greatest lesson we have learned from Making Health Happen is rural residents/communities cannot change their health outcomes if they do not know their health status," he said. "Also from these events, we learned that residents want to know their health status, but with limited access to care, people tend to visit doctors for immediate needs and not those extended services."

A FIRST IN THE NATION



The Rural Surgical Residency Program is the nation's first officially designated, separately accredited rural residency training track program. Jodi Cisco-Goff, M.D., left, is the associate director and Farzad Amiri, M.D., is the program director of the new residency.

Rural West Virginia serving as medical training ground

New surgical residency to teach about needs of smaller communities

The Marshall Community Health Consortium — which consists of Marshall University's Joan C. Edwards School of Medicine, Marshall Health, Cabell Huntington Hospital, Valley Health and Holzer Health Systems — will partner with Logan Regional Medical Center to establish an accredited rural surgery residency program beginning this year.

The new residency will be a model for other programs, addressing specific benchmarks unique to surgery in a rural setting. The Association of American Medical Colleges reports that a shortage of between 23,100 and 31,600 general surgeons is expected by 2025.

The consortium has received a \$750,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Health Resources & Services Administration (HRSA) to help it develop curriculum, recruit faculty and address the clinical and learning environment needs for the program.

Residents in this program will spend at least 50% of the five-year training residency in a rural hospital.

Logan Regional Medical Center is a 132-bed acute care facility in Logan County, West Virginia, that will serve as an initial training ground.



Dr. Amiri is pictured with fourth-year Marshall medical student Brandon Fazalare, left and below.



A well-rounded rural surgeon can eliminate the need to transfer patients to larger hospitals, which keeps both surgery and follow-up care closer to home.

Farzad Amiri, M.D.

"Our rural surgery residents will be trained to handle the needs of smaller, rural communities," said Farzad Amiri, M.D., F.A.C.S., general surgeon at Marshall Health, associate professor for the Joan C. Edwards School of Medicine and program director of the new residency program. He will team up with Jodi Cisco-Goff, M.D., F.A.C.S., a general surgeon in Logan and assistant professor, who will serve as the program's associate director.

"Their residency experience will include collaboration with orthopaedic, obstetric and gynecologic, and urologic surgeons to ensure they acquire a broad emphasis on treating a

multitude of diseases," Dr. Amiri said. "A well-rounded rural surgeon can eliminate the need to transfer patients to larger hospitals, which keeps both surgery and follow-up care closer to home."

The first residents begin this year and additional residents will be accepted each year, with a maximum of 15. The Rural Surgical Residency Program has earned initial accreditation from the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME), making it the nation's first officially designated, separately accredited rural residency training track program.

‘If not us, who?’

Hospital dedicates new space and puts new emphasis on healthy living



Story by Jean Hardiman

Sitting atop one of the green hills of Spencer, West Virginia, with a beautiful view and a bright new mission, is Roane General Hospital wearing its new look.

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the hospital completed a renovation of 30,000 square feet and added 40,000 new square feet of space in 2021 to help the healthcare providers there improve outpatient services, which make up about 98% of patient encounters these days — but also achieve their new goal: Helping the community get healthy.

“In addition to the outpatient focus, the board of directors updated our mission statement to also address the overall health of the community and not just healthcare services,” said CEO

Douglas Bentz. “So as part of this project, we took on the responsibility of trying to improve our community’s health.”

Years of experience topped with numbers from a community needs survey had them concerned. The median age of the population, the poverty level, and several other numbers representing challenges were high compared to the rest of the nation and the state average. The population declined over 9% in 20 years. Access to healthcare was low.

A new approach: Prescription for Your Health

It was time for a new approach. The hospital’s medical and support staff decided to take action, starting with a new program called

Prescription for Your Health, a three-pronged plan overseen by each participant's physician, which includes a personalized medical plan, a fitness plan, and nutrition education. And the expansion of the hospital's facilities — featuring a sizable fitness center, health-focused café, therapy services, a small pool, and pulmonary and cardiac rehabilitation facilities — are custom-designed for the program.

"The footprint of the fitness facilities, the Healthy Way Café, and the nutrition education that we've got here was planned as part of this project and this program, Prescription for Your Health," Bentz said. "Prescription for Your Health is an individual health plan that has to be approved by your physician."

The personalized medical plan requires participants to establish a relationship with their primary care provider and requires regular communication about screenings, medications, and other medical needs each participant may have.

"Next is the personalized fitness plan, whether that is going to be group classes, personal training, or if it's someone experienced, they can allow you to have autonomy in the gym," Bentz said. "It's a customized plan, based on each individual's needs."

"The third leg is an education component that focuses on nutrition. Folks that enter in the program have to take a basic nutrition course. If you're diabetic, you have to go through a diabetic education course. If you're a smoker, you must attend smoking cessation classes."

"There are some requirements you have to adhere to as part of the program. At the end of the day, the physician signs off on that medical plan, that fitness plan, that education plan, and that becomes your prescription for your health. That's the concept."

Along the way, health coaches stay in contact with the participants on a monthly or quarterly basis — whatever is required.

"They meet with a lot of the participants in the program to encourage them, motivate them, and try to tear down barriers to what's stopping them from improving their health," Bentz said.

The team of providers, fitness trainers and health coaches is amazing, Bentz said.



In addition to the outpatient focus, the board of directors updated our mission statement to also address the overall health of the community and not just healthcare services. So as part of this project, we took on the responsibility of trying to improve our community's health.

Douglas Bentz, CEO
Roane General Hospital

"They're the ones making a difference. They're the ones motivating, encouraging — they do unbelievable work," he said.

So far, about 600 participants have enrolled, and it's free to them as long as they continue to participate and follow the guidelines of the program. They get free access to the fitness center and group exercise classes, free access to support groups, free nutrition education, and access to the health professionals on the team, as well as a 20% discount at the Healthy Way Café, and all fees waived at the hospital's annual health fair that provides their necessary lab tests.

Tracking program progress

The hospital has even established a way to track the program's progress.

"We are starting to track and look at all of the data," Bentz said. "We're creating baseline metrics and then on a quarterly basis, we're updating those."

Partnering with DignifiHealth — a healthcare software provider that helps track data — Roane General Hospital's Prescription for Your Health team can measure grip strength, weight, waist circumference, sit-to-stand metrics, and other measurements.

"They come in and pull data from different sources, from our fitness system and from our electronic health records," Bentz said. "We'll be able to take our 600 people in the program, pull out (the numbers for) those with diabetes and look at their progress and the average A1Cs of that population for the first 18 months. We're starting to see a slight decline. We're looking at blood pressure in hypertensive patients, and we'll be tracking all of those different metrics. The idea is to bend the curve. We've got the program in place and the data in place to prove that we're making progress in the program."

"There are numerous individual success stories that we can talk about. We have numerous examples of people's health being changed because of this program, but are we moving the metric for the population? We believe we are, but we're still trying to dig into more information on that."

Building a culture of health

The lower level of the building is now dedicated to building "a culture of health," Bentz said. "We're

NEW PROGRAM AT ROANE GENERAL HOSPITAL

Prescription for Your Health

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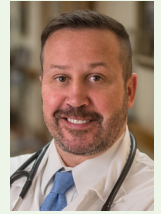
Personalized
medical plan

2

Fitness plan

3

Nutrition education



Scott Duffy, M.D.
Medical Director

trying to build a culture of activity, nutrition and fellowship. It's a program that we're very thankful for and very proud of and we're going to be spending a lot of time and attention on in the upcoming years. We really want to make a difference."

"Next in the process is approaching different charitable organizations that might have an interest in supporting it," Bentz said.

"We didn't ask for the money before we built it. We wanted to show them the data that it works, and then we're going to be asking for some support to help with that program and additional programs," he said. "Food insecurity is a big one that we're focusing on now and the realization about the extremely poor diet choices, lack of access to fresh vegetables, and lack of knowledge about cooking. We've peeled that onion back and we've seen a significant need in our community, more so than we ever thought."

While Bentz himself envisioned a wellness program with three prongs — medical planning, fitness and education — for individualized health promotion, he said part of the inspiration came from Dr. Scott Duffy at Roane General Hospital, who serves as medical director of the program, alongside executive director of the program Jeffrey Tanner, a physical therapist.

"(Dr. Duffy) is a cardiologist. He's also a triathlete," Bentz said. "Dr. Duffy would actually give a prescription to a patient and say, 'Please exercise.' Then the patient would come down to the fitness complex and work out."



The footprint of the fitness facilities, the Healthy Way Café, and the nutrition education was planned as part of Prescription for Your Health, which is an individual health plan that has to be approved by a physician.



Nutrition Educator Vicki Withers, left, helps patients put a plan together for eating healthy. Fitness trainer Matt White, above, works with patient Teresa Hickman. About 600 participants have enrolled in the free program.

"That was the inspiration behind it. Dr. Duffy is very much into health and wellness. He is very much a believer. Time and again, he says that if we just take care of ourselves, it's going to take care of 80% of our chronic illnesses and diseases."

The upper level of the hospital has undergone renovations as well. Its emergency room is now about double in size. "When we finally finished this ER, it was right when COVID started. It was an absolute blessing," Bentz said. "Everybody has private rooms now. We have nine total. They're all negative air pressure in terms of being able to deal

with the air circulation for COVID. It was perfect timing. And this is a beautiful ER. We're extremely fortunate to have that."

The hospital also has a helipad and benefits from HealthNet emergency helicopter service, he said. As far as renovations go, the upper level also has new frontage and a new walkway that features historical photos on the walls.

"We thought, 'What are we going to do with this wall space?' I think we tastefully created a place to display (photos and information about) memorable



Vice President of Wellness Jeff Tanner, left, shows Brock Tanner how to use the treadmill.

events in the community, local history, notable people and groups, manufacturing and local business and industry.”

The hospital also features quilts by local artisans.

A concierge approach

With the renovations, the hospital is trying a new approach, where patients don’t have access to areas where they’re not receiving care.

“We try to create a concierge approach,” Bentz said. “If you come for a service — surgery, radiology, labs, stress tests, wound care service — you register, you sit down, and we come and get you for the service. Before, you could walk to the department, but now you can’t.”

There are 27 exam rooms at Roane General Hospital and the hospital integrates specialists with its primary care team, he said.

“When you’re at a small hospital, you can’t justify a lot of specialists full-time,” Bentz said. But it makes sense to have one pulmonologist drive to Roane County once a week, rather than having 25 patients driving to Charleston to see the pulmonologist, he said.

“It’s just one day a week, but that’s what we’ve done here,” he said. “We offer wound care services one day a week, orthopedics is here two days a week. Pulmonology and podiatry are here one day a week, and several other specialists are here on a weekly basis.”

One new program from 2022 is in partnership with West Virginia University Medicine’s oncology services, so that chemotherapy can be done on site.

“An oncologist is here once a week,” Bentz said. “That’s been a wonderful service. Before, they would have to drive to Parkersburg or Charleston for chemotherapy, sometimes three or four times a week.”

Aiming for a healthier future

Roane General Hospital serves about 18,000 people in its primary service area, made up of Roane County and southern Calhoun County. It is also starting to see patients from outlying areas, including Kanawha, Clay, Wirt and Jackson counties, Bentz said.

Hopefully, with the renovations and the new approach the hospital is taking, those folks will have a healthier future, he said. Something needed to change, and they were fortunate to be able to make that happen, he said.

“The community-needs survey says it all. The population is getting more and more unhealthy. The numbers speak for themselves,” Bentz said. “Continuing to just take care of people when they’re sick seems like — what’s the definition of insanity? Doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result?”

“If we stop focusing on people once they’re sick and start trying to also focus on their behaviors and decisions, hopefully it will lead to a healthy and meaningful life. It’s now our mission of the hospital — focusing on the health of the community and not just healthcare. If it’s not us, who?”



Donovan “Dino” Beckett, D.O., is a practicing physician and CEO of the Williamson Health and Wellness Center.

Creating a path forward

Williamson physician and health center CEO, team explore opportunities to strengthen their community’s health and economy

Story by
Jean Hardiman

Dr. Donovan “Dino” Beckett graduated from West Virginia University in 1993 with a plan to become a pharmacist. Then he participated in an internship program through the University of Miami (Fla.) that took him to South America — the small city of Tiltil, Chile, to be exact.

It was there that Beckett got his first close-up look at rural medicine. The needs there were great, and the physicians met them with the resources they had on hand, usually their eyes, ears and hands. And that inspired him.

Today, Beckett is 20 years into a career in medicine in which he, too, is meeting great

needs with the resources he has on hand. With a team of dedicated healthcare providers and practitioners, he’s making things happen in his home community of Williamson in Mingo County, West Virginia, and he’s finding that a small community can get a lot done if they work together, pool their talent and resources, and find those strategies and opportunities that allow them to help as many neighbors as they can.

Beckett is a practicing physician and CEO of the Williamson Health and Wellness Center. It offers medical, dental, behavioral health services, is home to a farmers market and community



From left are Rebecca Casey, Jamie Wellman and Kristin DeBoard.

garden and a new community kitchen — as well as innovative programs such as the Mingo County Diabetes Coalition and Community Health Worker model. It's now also the parent company of Williamson Memorial Hospital, expected to be fully reopened and operational this year after it fell into bankruptcy and closed in 2020 under previous ownership.

About 120,000 square feet of space is dedicated to both diversifying the economy and keeping the people of Mingo County well.

"If you spent a day in my clinic, you'd see why this is probably one of the most rewarding jobs on the face of the Earth," Beckett said. "I get paid to take care of some of the most amazing people on the planet. My parents always talked about what a great place it was to grow up and how proud they were of it." And they were right, he said.

"Just to have patients come in, and they're asking me how I'm doing, it's just special," he said.

Affordable health for a community in need

As a Federally Qualified Health Center, Williamson Health and Wellness Center offers services on a sliding scale, according to WV Department of Health

and Human Resources and Services Administration guidelines. It opened in 2014. Beckett graduated from the West Virginia School of Osteopathic Medicine and started his own practice in the early 2000s, but then decided to open the center as a way to help fellow community members after the loss of mining jobs in Mingo County. He had begun with free monthly clinics at his practice, but the demand led to a full-fledged facility dedicated to affordable health care.

Not even a decade later, it serves about 12,000 patients in medical, dental and behavioral health services, as well as podiatry, pediatrics and medically assisted treatment for addiction. The center also has a successful farmers market that has brought in \$100,000 in revenue per year, a community garden and a new community kitchen, which just opened last year in Williamson. The center partners with area foodbanks, and is also open to the community for other projects.

"We do community-supported agriculture boxes for people with diabetes and people with high blood pressure to help them make good decisions and better meals to help reduce glucose and help keep their blood pressure in check," Beckett said. "So it's full-circle. When we talk about medicine, we're also talking about nutrition and access to healthy foods." This ties in with the Mingo County Diabetes

Coalition, a successful effort at the Williamson Health and Wellness Center.

Community health workers

"We also have the Community Health Worker program, which is an amazing program that's in three states and 29 counties now," Beckett said.

Through the Community Health Worker model, the center uses an algorithm that helps identify high-risk patients, each of whom gets a chronic care management team and a community health worker who makes a home visit once a week. The health workers check in and "make sure they're being compliant with medications, but also to make sure they have food," Beckett said. "And they just work with them in their territory. Instead of the 15 minutes that they would have in my office, (a health worker) can go into the home and assess what's going on in their environment.

"With that, we have had tremendous results. We have dropped hemoglobin A1C, which is a three-month measurement of blood sugar, by 2% for one year, which is amazing. Just to put it in perspective, if we were a pharmaceutical company that had a drug that was able to drop hemoglobin A1C by 0.6%, we'd have a multibillion dollar drug. We dropped it 2%, just by using intervention. So it's garnered a lot of attention that has allowed us to expand that program and partner with Marshall University and (the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation), so now that program is being started in other parts of the state as well."

From recovery to the workforce

Another program the center has established focuses on recovery from substance use disorder and helping people in recovery find work, a critical

factor for staying well. The New Heights Consortium partners with area businesses to provide internships for those in the recovery community.

"As people go through recovery, the biggest thing is being able to find work or someone that is willing to employ them," Beckett said. "You can go through recovery, but if you don't have anything on the back end of that, a lot of times you just take the path of least resistance. It's a lot harder to go out and pound the pavement and find a job when you're trying to stay in recovery, so this is a way to facilitate it and incorporate it along the way so when they get out, they do have a viable option."

There are multiple businesses in the downtown area as well as some in neighboring South Williamson that are participating in the program. It's offered in Mingo County and in a small portion of eastern Pike County, Kentucky, right now, he said, having just gotten started in 2022.

When participants reach a certain point in recovery, they apply for an internship, he said.

"After they learn some soft skills and go through some job training, they're able to go to that job site and work with them," Beckett said. "It's kind of like a trial period to see how they do."

The employers benefit from that as well.

"Everyone is looking for employees right now," Beckett said. "This is a way that they can get some of their training salary subsidized, so that helps. You're getting help while you're training an employee. So it's not like you're training them and then if they don't perform, you're out that training cost. This



The Williamson Health and Wellness Center offers medical, dental, behavioral health services, is home to a farmers market and community garden and a new community kitchen — as well as innovative programs such as the Mingo County Diabetes Coalition and Community Health Worker model.

helps on both ends of it.”

Members of the recovery community who are diligent in the process are great job candidates to bring on board, he said.

“It helps first-time employees and people who have been convicted of a felony or anything like that, so it’s not just people who need help with addiction but anybody who has had difficulty entering or re-entering the workforce,” Beckett said.

Supporting health and the economy

Another big effort to strengthen Mingo County, both economically and in the health of its people, is through the purchase of Williamson Memorial Hospital. Beckett said he never foresaw Williamson Health and Wellness Center becoming the parent company of Williamson Memorial, but Mingo County needed a hospital again, and there it sat as a viable solution. Williamson Health and Wellness purchased it and created a nonprofit entity — Williamson Memorial Hospital.

“We jumped in and purchased it,” Beckett said.

“The idea was to do a quick turnaround — to do some lipstick and get it open, but it turned into a much larger project. For an example, we got in there and saw some plumbing issues and we started looking into it and ended up having to replace the entire plumbing of the hospital. That was \$700,000 out of the gate.”

The entire HVAC system needed replaced as well because, after closing, it no longer met the new code requirements.

“There were a lot of regulatory things that we did not anticipate we would have to go through. As you’re doing those things, you find other things that you have to fix,” Beckett said. For the newly reopened 75,000-square-foot hospital, there is new clinic space, as well as the labs and X-ray space, ER, inpatient beds, and radiology.

He thanked U.S. Sen. Joe Manchin, and Gov. Jim

Justice for helping provide \$2 million toward the project, as well as thanking the community, and architecture firm Pickering Associates out of Parkersburg and BB&L Construction.

“We wouldn’t have been able to get through this process without them,” he said. “It’s new to us, and we were able to do it with their guidance and leadership.” Having it closed was truly a hardship on the region, Beckett said.

“We have an older population. Some of them don’t drive, so they have had to get transportation, and that’s been difficult,” he said, adding that other patients struggled with the expense because they were forced to go to hospitals that were out of network for their insurance providers.

“When we talk about medicine, we’re also talking about nutrition and access to healthy foods.”

Donovan “Dino” Beckett, D.O.

“Those types of things, you can feel right off the bat,” Beckett said. “This hospital is near and dear to the community, and being able to have it open (means a lot).”

It’s crucial when you look at the economy as well, he said.

“When you’re looking at creating jobs and economic development, people look for housing, healthcare and the school system. If we don’t have healthcare, we’re kind of dead in the water right out of the gate,” he said.

Currently, Williamson Health and Wellness Center employs over 130 workers, and the hospital will add about 80 more, he said. Every job helps.

“We lost 1,000 jobs in 2015, and we never fully recovered from that,” Beckett said. “That’s when we started looking at diversifying the economy. The good thing for our area is that coal is on the upswing, but we know all too well that’s not going to be a permanent thing. Geopolitical changes are obviously going to impact what happens with the coal industry.”

“Not only with healthcare but other things in the area, like tourism and being able to support that, we



A big effort to strengthen Mingo County both economically and in the health of its people is through the purchase of Williamson Memorial Hospital.

have to be able to diversify the economy to have employability to handle the ebb and flow of the market.”

Meeting the latest needs

The center has two certified nurse practitioners on staff who focus on psychiatry. Another nurse practitioner will be added this year.

“We’re happy with how we’ve been able to address a lot of the needs in behavioral health,” Beckett said. “We’re expanding into the school system. That’s going to be a big part of this year and next year. We have a mobile medical/dental unit that we’re going to be bringing online and also have counseling and general medical services available in the school system.”

“Obviously, COVID had a significant impact on our school-age children and young adults. ... A year or more of remote learning has had a significant impact on a lot of skills and a social impact as well,” he said. “We want to be able to help with that. There was a shortage even before, and COVID sort of pulled the band-aid off and showed what we’re actually dealing with and the shortfalls there, so that’s going to be a big area of focus for us. Just creating access.”

Access is a struggle

Access to healthcare has long been a struggle for a rural county like Mingo.

“The biggest challenge for an older population that has the topography that we have is transportation issues and getting people access to that. That’s the first and foremost barrier that we’re working on solving,” he said. “Telemedicine has been a huge tool for that, but a lot of times, we still need to see the patients for whatever reason to address the needs going on.”

One of the good things about continuing to practice as a physician is that it helps see different needs and situations from different angles, Beckett said. Though being a CEO of a Federally Qualified Health Center is a no small responsibility, Beckett has no interest in giving up his practice.

“For me, being a physician and being the CEO is kind of the secret sauce of our success because I understand patient needs directly. I understand provider needs, staffing needs and also the administrative part,” he said. “I don’t think I could ever stop practicing medicine because that’s my passion — being able to help people, particularly in the healthcare setting.”



Leading the Way for Rural Health



The Center for Rural Health Development, Inc. (Center) is a private, not-for-profit organization that has provided leadership on rural health issues in West Virginia since 1994. The Center works across the continuum of health care providers – from community health centers and hospitals to private physicians and dentists, as well as other health care providers – to ensure that communities have access to quality and viable health care services.

Our mission is to create a healthy future for West Virginia by improving the health of our residents and the strength of our health care delivery system, especially in rural and underserved communities.

To learn more please visit wvruralhealth.org or call (304) 397-4071.

THE CENTER'S PROGRAMS INCLUDE:





Elly Donahue, Fresh Start Program Coordinator

Wild Wonderful & Healthy

Grassroots effort shows how bringing ideas, resources and efforts together can lead to healthy changes in the community

Story by Jean Hardiman

From new water stations in schools to a greenhouse for fresh produce to more dedicated green space for fitness, Logan County is moving step by step toward improving the health of the community, and it's a team of invested community members that is leading the charge.

The grassroots program, Wild, Wonderful & Healthy Logan County — a regional offshoot of Wild, Wonderful & Healthy West Virginia from the Center for Rural Health Development — is a collaboration between representatives from a variety of

organizations in Logan County to create changes in their community for healthy families, a healthy workforce, and healthy economic development for their rural region.

The Logan County team includes Logan Regional Medical Center, the community action agency Pride Community Services; Logan Healthcare Foundation, a philanthropic organization focused on improving healthcare; and Coalfield Health Center, which as a Federally Qualified Health Center Look-Alike, offers sliding-scale care to the community.



Chapmanville Regional High School senior Emma Muncy holds a water bottle. From new water stations in schools to a greenhouse Logan County is moving step by step toward improving the health of the community.

A core team in Logan County has implemented a Community Health Improvement (CHI) Committee, with members from the business community, the faith community, the Logan County Board of Education, civic organizations, and local town leaders, who meet quarterly to help the core team identify resources, implement projects, and create fresh ideas.

Focused on three main areas

Kristin Dial, executive director of the Coalfield Health Center, is one of four core members of the Wild, Wonderful & Healthy Logan County team.

"Our community health plan focuses on three main areas that were prioritized from many identified health disparities in our county," Dial said. "Our three main areas of focus are physical inactivity, food insecurity, and youth obesity."

Their long-term goal is to improve those three things by 2% from baseline, as well as continuing to improve health behaviors, outcomes, and rankings, she said.

"Logan County is 54 of 55 in community health rankings, and it is our hope to continue to improve in the annual ranking by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation," Dial said.

"Our community health plan aligns strategic plans of all healthcare entities in our county, so we are all working toward the same goal. Goals are accomplished by the development of annual action plans and programmatic implementation that affects long-term health initiatives and policy."

They're three years into their plan and starting to see a shift, she said. First, there's more awareness, which is no small thing. Also, there are health improvement projects in the works throughout the county.

As leaders of health in our community, it is our responsibility to change the narrative for the next generation.

**Kristin Dial, executive director
of the Coalfield Health Center**

"We have implemented several long-term, evidence-based projects that are visible to the community, such as a local greenhouse," she said. "The greenhouse will have many beneficiaries and expand access to healthy foods to our local food pantry

and then the community at large by extending the growing season."

In late 2022, its first seedlings were being produced. The 1,200-square-foot greenhouse at the Logan County Resource Center is operated by the Logan County Commission. Allowing for more fresh produce for throughout the year, it will help Logan County residents have access to healthier foods more often.

"The greenhouse is operated by the Fresh Start program, which is a recovery program, and the participants have previously worked with raised beds," she said. "The produce is expected to benefit our local food pantry (Hungry Lambs). The goal will be for 100% of the food pantry participants to receive fresh produce, because currently only 10% of the participants receive the very limited supply. The food pantry operates once monthly so the excess produce will be a source to restart the county farmer's market, which will contribute to the overall health of the county and especially those who cannot afford fresh fruits and vegetables."

Health in schools

Working with the Logan County Board of Education, the group has also helped establish new programs specifically benefiting young people.

"We have provided funding for expansion of water stations in schools while teaching students about healthy water intake," Dial said. "We have hired a full-time Community Health Improvement Coordinator who has been able to expand our efforts, and our focus is very much on health promotion in our youth."

The community health improvement coordinator is leading the "Way to Go H2O" campaign, encouraging kids to drink fewer sugary drinks. To date, over 639 Logan County students have been reached, and testing has shown a more than 20% increase in understanding of the negative effects of sugary beverages, Dial said.

Up next was an anti-vaping campaign. Logan County has brought the national "Catch My Breath" program to schools to teach students the harmful effects of vaping. By late 2022, 534 Logan County students had completed that program.

More greenspace

To improve opportunities for physical activity, the organization is aiming to dedicate more greenspace in Logan County to fitness.

"Our group focuses on long-term outcomes, and our current project has been working on a greenspace to enhance the physical activity of one specific community in our county," she said. The group worked with architectural design students from West Virginia University to come up with the designs.

Community health plan focuses on 3 main areas:

- **Physical inactivity**
- **Food insecurity**
- **Youth obesity**

"The community was surveyed prior to the project, so we had benchmark data surrounding activity and also utilization data of the future proposed site," Dial said. "We are working on our next annual action plan and are excited to implement some unique, county-wide strategies to increase activity through our business sector and our youth."

It's a long road, but definitely a worthwhile effort, as rural areas have some of the greatest needs and, at the same time, some of the greatest challenges, she said.

"Our group is passionate about the health of our community because West Virginia and Logan County specifically has some of worst health statistics in the nation for co-morbidities," Dial said. "Our friends and family members are at great risk for premature death and chronic disease. As leaders of health in our community, it is our responsibility to change the narrative for the next generation."

"We follow national, evidence-based programs as closely as we can, but also recognize the challenges of our own communities are unique," Dial said. "The work we are doing does not provide instant results or gratification, but we know we are making investments into the future health statistics of Logan County."

"Healthcare in rural areas is challenging due to the uncontrollable variables and social determinants our population is facing. After completing a root cause analysis of our health disparities, it became very apparent to our group that we had to be realistic in our efforts to meet patients where they are and work on attainable programs and policy changes."

Gaining recognition

Their efforts are getting recognition. The National



In late 2022, the first seedlings were sprouting at the greenhouse at the Logan County Resource Center.

Providing more fresh produce throughout the year will give Logan County residents access to healthier foods more often.



Organization of State Offices of Rural Health has honored Wild, Wonderful & Healthy Logan County as one of its Community Stars, for its efforts to address the social determinants of health. It recognizes just one program in each state yearly.

The award is announced on National Rural Health Day each year for a group in each state “that is improving the health of rural communities through innovation, leadership, programming, and collaboration,” Dial said. “Although this is the first collaborative award for the Wild, Wonderful & Healthy Logan County group, Coalfield Health received the 2021 Outstanding Rural Health Organization award from the National Rural Health Association for their collaborative work around Wild, Wonderful & Healthy Logan County and involving medical students in the rural health experience. Both the Marshall University Joan C. Edwards School of Medicine and the West Virginia School of Osteopathic Medicine have allowed us to involve and enhance student health rotations through our work.”

It’s rewarding to receive recognition for their efforts,

Dial said, adding that she hopes it raises awareness for those who can contribute to the cause. However, those involved are passionate about the work they do and know there is much more important work ahead, regardless of recognition.

“The people of West Virginia are deserving of health equity and allocation of resources to help them improve their quality of life,” she said. “I can’t emphasize enough the importance of combined resources and the ability to accomplish goals when aligning strategic initiatives among like-minded organizations.

“The healthcare industry cannot improve health alone. Health does not just happen at the doctor’s office. Health is part of our daily lives, work, and communities. We need health to be in the strategic plans of all businesses outside of the healthcare sector. We need county commissions to have funding appropriated for health initiatives. We need statewide efforts to gather better data on youth obesity and implement policy to help support the barriers to care around known social determinants of health.”

Q&A

Honoring a friend *Inspiring* a community

Medical student launches fitness park project in memory of a friend

Nicholas Dolan, a fourth-year medical student at Marshall University's Joan C. Edwards School of Medicine, launched and completed a project to bring a new fitness opportunity to his hometown of Madison, a small coalfield town in Boone County in the southern part of the Mountain State. Having graduated from Scott High School in 2016, he attended West Virginia University and, thanks to the opportunities offered during high school, was able to graduate from WVU in just three years with a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology. He also received the "Most Outstanding Senior Award" in the department.

As 2022 was closing out, he was living with his fiancée, Lindsay, and two dogs, Roscoe and Jax, and was interviewing for a residency position in ophthalmology, his specialty of choice. He looks forward to providing accessible eye care to underserved populations in southern West Virginia.

We reached out to Nicholas to talk about his interest in healthcare and in helping his hometown open the Parker Graffius Memorial Outdoor Fitness Park. Here's what he had to say:

Q: Can you talk about your interest in health and medicine?

A: I believe patients in rural communities deserve the same care as those in large cities, and that it is my responsibility to provide that care to the people in southern West Virginia. Additionally, the



Nicholas Dolan, a fourth-year medical student, launched a project to bring a new fitness park to his hometown Madison in Boone County.

opportunity to develop long-term relationships with patients while being trusted with the most important sense of the human body is unique to the field. I went into medicine because of the opportunity to create deeper relationships with people and help them improve their lives, so finally achieving that goal has been an exhilarating experience. People come to you in their most vulnerable times, and having the opportunity to be the person that helps them through that means you are doing something bigger than yourself.

Q: Can you tell us about your background? Where did you grow up? What did you enjoy doing as a kid, and who were some important people who shaped you as a person?

A: Growing up in Madison was a unique experience that I treasure because it provided me the opportunity to form lifelong friendships with teachers, neighbors, and even strangers on the street. Many of my K-12 teachers continue to check in on me via social media, even though I haven't seen some of them in over five years. My high school teachers played a major role in my academic success. High school was also when I realized how important it was to take care of patients in rural communities and when I set my sights on becoming a physician. The community and my family were unending in their support for this goal of mine.

In my early childhood and adolescent years, spending time with my amazing parents, siblings, cousins, grandma, and my two best friends, Parker Graffius and Lexie Bailey, were some of my most treasured memories. I also enjoyed playing sports as a kid, participating in soccer, basketball, golf, track, and football. My mom and dad were the best parents I could have asked for, and they instilled in me the value of perseverance, hard work, and hospitality from a young age. My father has worked for State Farm Insurance for over 30 years, and luckily, I had a stay-at-home mother who cooked a fresh dinner almost every night and ensured I walked a straight and narrow path. I can count the number of times my parents missed one of my academic or athletic events growing up on one hand; they have been my support system throughout all my life endeavors. My older brother and sister exemplified how to be successful regardless of where you were raised and served as my role models, graduating from WVU as a dentist and a lawyer, respectively. I have a long list of aunts, uncles, and cousins who have been an integral part of my success as well.

Q: Can you talk about the Parker Graffius Memorial Outdoor Fitness Park, its namesake and how you chose its location?

A: Parker Graffius and Lexie Bailey were two of my best friends growing up and they both made a significant impact on my life. We were practically inseparable during our elementary and middle school years. Lexie was my next-door neighbor, and until I got my driver's license, I ran down to their house barefoot almost every day. Lexie's mother and father were like second parents to me, and my parents probably owe them child support

because I spent so much time at their house. Lexie's dad, Timmy, is planning to officiate my wedding. I would consider him just as much of a best friend of mine as Lexie is.

Parker wasn't our neighbor, but that didn't stop us from hanging out with him every chance we could. Parker was an imaginative, extroverted, funny, understanding, trustworthy, and kind individual who could brighten anyone's day. He loved the outdoors and was the first person to introduce me to water skiing, mountain biking, and the world of creating YouTube videos. Parker was always down for an adventure. He played a few sports in his early childhood, but ultimately settled on soccer as his main sport once we got to high school. Unfortunately, he was taken from this world during our freshman year of high school, but his legacy of adventure, kind heartedness, and imagination still live on. He was the inspiration behind the location and title of the park — "Robert Parker Graffius (RPG) Memorial Outdoor Fitness Park."

RPG Memorial Outdoor Fitness Park is an outdoor exercise facility located in West Madison, less than a mile from where Parker grew up. The park consists of 13 weatherproof workout stations



The fitness park is dedicated in honor of Robert "Parker" Graffius, a high school classmate who passed away.



Nicholas' mother Lisa Dolan, sister Emily Cook and cousin Mason Hill (background) enjoy the fitness park.

that can be used year-round and is arranged in a circular pattern to hit every muscle group from your shoulders to your calves. The workout area is 29 feet by 48 feet of concrete, topped with a poured-in-place rubber. It is attached to the walking trail that connects downtown Madison to the rest of the area and sees heavy foot traffic every day.

Q: What were some of the steps and challenges to making the park a reality? Who helped and how?

A: The process of creating a fitness park began when I was selected to become the president of the Men's Health Organization during my third year of medical school. I had been the treasurer for the previous two years, so I was aware of our group's financial situation, and I saw an opportunity to make a change with some longevity to it. My sister mentioned that the only public gym had closed in the town and wondered if there was any kind of solution to get people active. After some brainstorming, I discovered a unique solution to several problems my home area was facing. Along with the lack of access to a public gym, Boone County has one of the highest rates of diabetes, chronic heart diseases, and obesity in the country.

I spent about two months gathering five quotes for each piece of the park's puzzle. My initial budget was \$130,000, which seemed unattainable as a third-year medical student, but I didn't let this amount deter me from pursuing a dream. I approached several grant foundations with my idea, but many of them were unable to provide brick and



People come to you in their most vulnerable times, and having the opportunity to be the person that helps them through that means you are doing something bigger than yourself.

Nick Dolan

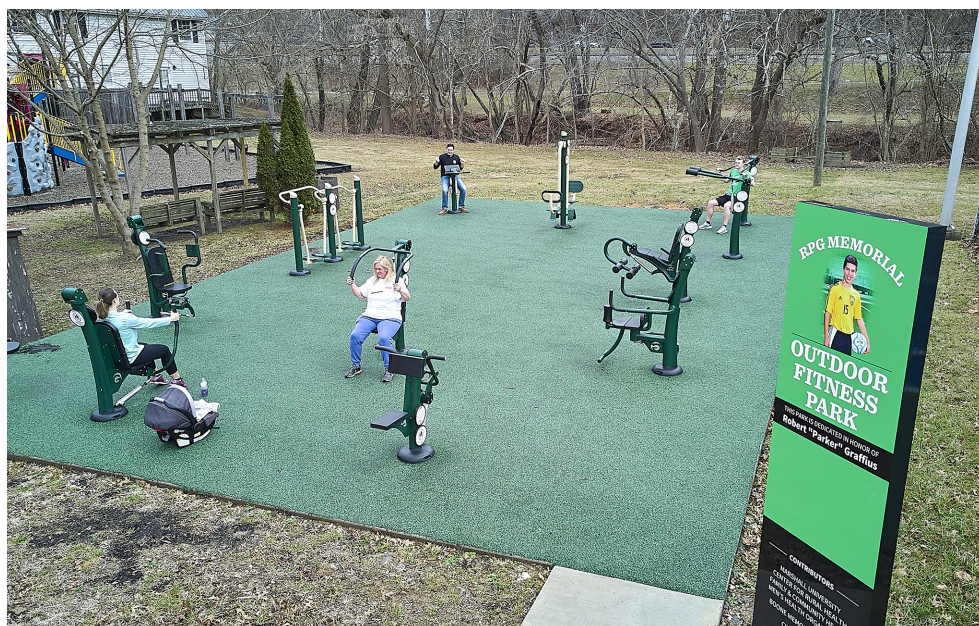


mortar grants. My luck finally changed when I got in touch with Marshall University's Robert C. Byrd Center for Rural Health. They gave me direction, and after a meeting with them, I returned to Madison to seek support from all levels of government as well as the local hospital foundation at Boone Memorial Health (BMH).

I obtained land, construction, and maintenance from the City of Madison as well as grant funding to get the project started from BMH and former West Virginia State Sen. Ron Stollings, M.D. I spent the next few months educating myself on grant writing and constructed a 54-page grant to present to the final piece of my puzzle, a group that the Center for Rural Health had set me up with. In early March, six months after I started my project, I presented my idea in front of Stern Floc Settlement Fund and asked for \$94,000. Two hours after my presentation, the group called me to tell me that



Dolan's initial budget was \$130,000, which seemed unattainable as a third-year medical student, but he didn't let this amount deter him from pursuing a dream.



they had unanimously voted to fund the remainder of my project. This project has been completed and opened to the public June 30, 2022.

Q: What are your hopes for the fitness park and how it will impact the people of Madison?

A: I hope that it serves as a way for people who are unable to access public gyms to become more active and improve their lifestyle to live happier and healthier lives. Furthermore, I hope that this project serves as an example of the impact that you could have on someone's life, even if you are in it for just a short time, as Parker did mine. That's why I believe there is no one more deserving of having the park named after them than my kind, imaginative, and adventurous friend, Robert Parker Graffius.

Q: What's next for you? What are your immediate goals, and do you have any long-range goals that you want to share?

A: Since the completion of the park, I've been finishing up my medical school classes, interviewing for residency, and received WV Rural Health Association's "Most Outstanding Student Award" for my efforts on the park. Upon completion of my residency in ophthalmology, I intend to return and care for the people in my hometown, possibly even opening a free clinic once a month to help the uninsured and underinsured patients in southern West Virginia. Although I don't have any projects on deck for my hometown in the immediate future, I plan to help create recreation activities around Boone County in the future.



Our Mission

The West Virginia Rural Health Association (WVRHA) advocates for empowering all West Virginians to advance their quality of life, their well-being, and their access to excellence in rural health care. Our mission is to unite people, communities, and organizations to strengthen rural health in West Virginia.



Become A Member

By being a member of the West Virginia Rural Health Association, you become a powerful advocate for empowering all West Virginians to advance their quality of life, their well-being, and their access to excellence in rural health care.

The WVRHA is a non-profit, grassroots, member-driven organization. A membership with us includes a variety of people and organizations that are interested in the health of rural West Virginians throughout the state. The WVRHA membership works together to identify the health care concerns of rural West Virginians and find ways to improve services in our communities.

The West Virginia Rural Health Association strives to represent the diversity of West Virginia, and we encourage people of all ethnicities, genders, and lifestyles to join.



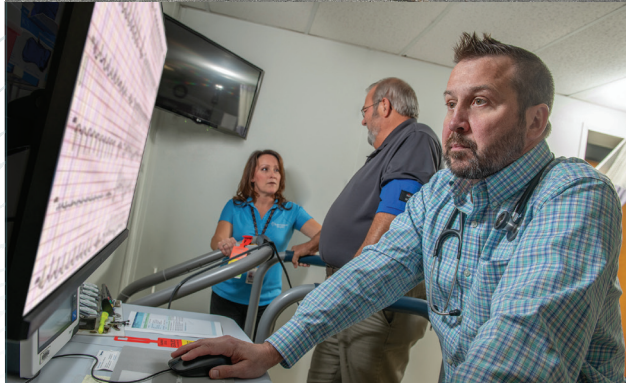
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