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Family practice physician Dr. Penelope Tippy

About

makes a difference in southern Illinois

Time

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“Rural health is my passion. I could talk all day,” says Penelope Tippy, M.D. “I’m passionate about family medicine, period.” That passion came through as Dr. Tippy gave a speech at a meeting of the Illinois Rural Health Task Force, focusing her remarks on the needs of the adolescent population.

Leaning forward, resting her arms on the table at John A. Logan Community College in Carterville, Dr. Tippy spoke powerfully in low tones and measured sentences in her straight-forward, no-nonsense style.

“In Franklin County, 50 percent of children under 18 are in the 200th percent of the poverty level. ... I’m worried about our adolescents. If we don’t care for them, we will not have other people who want to stay here, train here, and live here.”

As one of the final speakers at the meeting, the intensity and drama of Dr. Tippy’s strong voice seemed to wake up the panel of politicians who listened to her and other medical professionals give voice to rural citizens in need of health-care programs. The panel listened thoughtfully to Dr. Tippy, scratching notes with a fervor they hadn’t for the previous speakers. The rural family physician spoke for only about five minutes, but she made her points firmly and passionately.

“Mental health services are not available for adolescents in rural southern Illinois. ... Family physicians in rural southern Illinois are treating mental illnesses that we have not been trained to treat, because there is no one out there to help us. ... We need primary services in southern Illinois.”

PROFILE



For 30 years, Dr. Tippy has been one of the few providing primary care in West Frankfort, five years as a private physician and 25 years as a faculty member at SIU School of Medicine. In addition, Dr. Tippy has directed the SIU Family Practice Residency Program in nearby Carbondale for 22 years. She has devoted her life to medicine and to her hometown of West Frankfort.

The town runs deep in her blood. She grew up there, as did her father and mother. After completing medical school at the University of Illinois and a residency in New York state, she knew her soul was in West Frankfort. She seems to know everybody in town (even a clerk at the local Hardee's), and the Family Practice Clinic on the edge of town at times feels like a friendly get-together as she greets many patients with hugs.

"It's a quaint little community; it really is a community," Dr. Tippy says of her hometown. "I like the diversity of people. I like running to the grocery store and knowing people. Nobody cares if I'm in a T-shirt and shorts and don't look like a doctor."

She is a tall, commanding figure, with short, blonde hair and strong blue eyes. She's dressed casually in a gauzy white skirt and orange and brown, peasant-style top. The fashionable, chunky earrings and colorful beaded necklaces that she designed and created herself complement her bold personality. She may not think she looks like a doctor, but her commitment to patients displaces any question as she inspires

everyone around her with her energy, enthusiasm and commitment.

Tim Morthland, M.D., who joined the West Frankfort clinic staff in July after finishing his residency there, has known Dr. Tippy since he was an adolescent. "She's like a mom," he says. She's "harder than nails," but underneath, she also finds an emotional connection with her patients. He recalls being awed by Dr. Tippy's devotion to a hospice patient. "I watched her walk the family through the death," he recalls. "She was authoritative, yet tearful, empathetic, and compassionate with the family. She's not just a good doctor; she's socially competent."

"Dr. Tippy is the most creative, energetic person I know," says Clinical Coordinator Mary Stammer, who has worked with Dr. Tippy for 10 years. "She makes my life interesting, and she keeps me thinking about how we can do things better. She's always looking at what's next." Stammer notes Dr. Tippy's sincere interest in the children in Franklin County. "She's a determined woman, for whom failure is not an option." Indeed, Dr. Tippy hasn't given up despite the funding obstacles that are always present.

In just the past five years, Dr. Tippy has secured more than \$1 million in grants to support numerous programs for West Frankfort, from telemedicine and women's health, to extensive programs for adolescents, including an adolescent health care clinic, educational programs for pre-teen students and an adolescent health curriculum for medical residents.

Dr. Tippy can't recall what ignited the passion for doctoring. "I have to see patients – that's instant gratification. You feel like you've done something. Being able to treat somebody who is 10, another who is 90, another 30 – that's exciting. I'd get bored if I was always doing the same thing. I need that variety."

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During an afternoon at the West Frankfort clinic, family practice residents and faculty gather at their work stations, charting or researching. The residents chide each other about their paperwork in the casual environment, and Dr. Rudd's youthful visage is a point of jokes.

Dr. Tippy discusses with a few residents the upcoming accreditation. A debate about the revised resident handbook starts to get a little heated, but Dr. Tippy doesn't step in, letting the residents sort it out themselves.

"Teaching residents is just as exciting as seeing patients," she says. "It's an unbelievable investment."

This spring, she gained widespread acclaim and made her dream of mobile health care for teenagers a reality with the West Frankfort/Benton Care-A-Van. Although the van has been Dr. Tippy's personal crusade for 15 years, she doesn't impose a personal feeling of accomplishment now that it is on the road; she just takes it all in her easygoing manner. "I just hope it's a success," she says casually. "I hope people see the value in it."

About six years ago, her two adolescent sons helped her realize teens were in need. "My sons were asking me, 'My friend's girlfriend thinks she's pregnant; what should I tell her to do?' I realized that the kids really need education and a place to go."

Along with the numerous programs she's helped initiate, she recognizes the statewide interest in pre-school for children and HPV immunization, saying: "I think it's about time."

While services for children are long overdue, time is what it's all about for this woman who jokes about her obsessive compulsive tendencies and her inability to keep still.

Even when she's not working, she's fills every

moment of her time, staying active with her family and friends and pursuing her numerous avocations which include making jewelry. She has made hundreds of necklaces, bracelets and earrings for others.

In the basement of her rural West Frankfort home, she happily spends hours deftly designing her pieces and threading tiny beads onto fragile wires and strings.

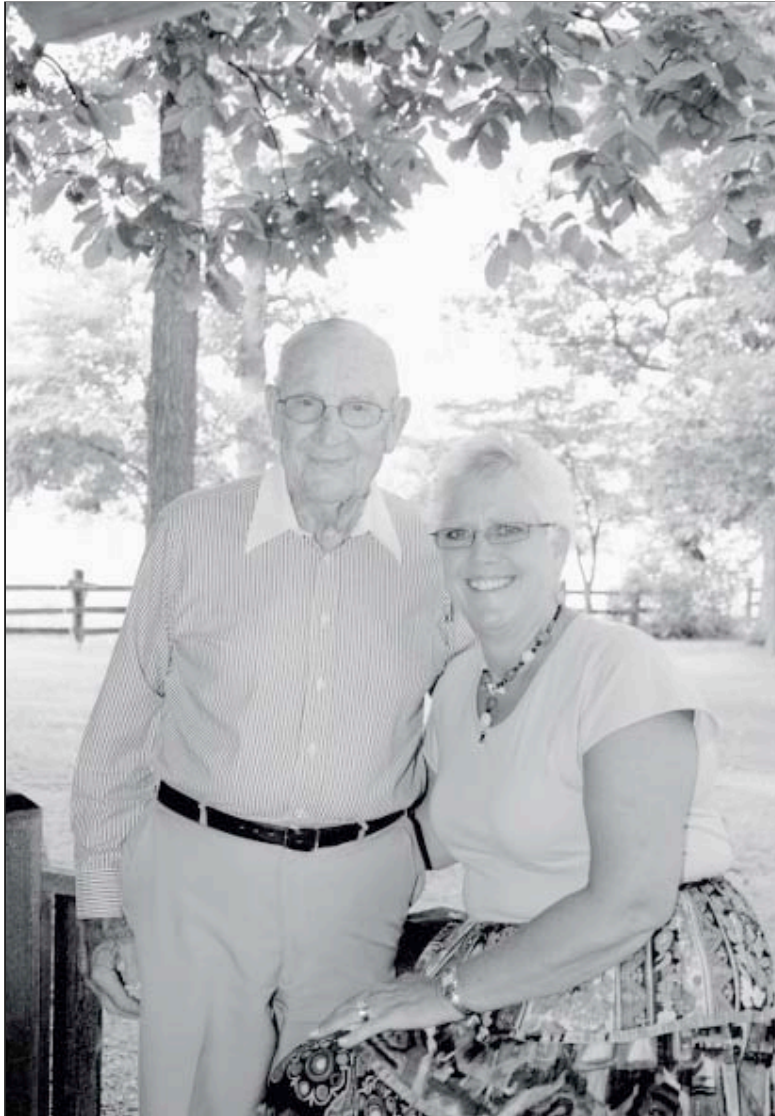
Scrapbooking is another outlet for her boundless creativity. "It keeps my sanity," she says. She finds peace in selecting just the right photograph or trinket from one of the many drawers of colored paper, scissors, markers, paper cutters and other accessories.

The stacks of colorful, detailed scrapbooks reflect her strong connection with her family tree. She's proudest of a four-inch thick tome that takes her family back five generations: her grandmother pauses for a picture while making apple butter; her grandfather stands in front of the local Howlett Insurance Agency he created. Carefully preserved photos show the courtship of her parents. Her father, Goebel Patton, was superintendent of the West Frankfort schools



Dr. Tippy talks with (from left) Dr. Tim Morthland, Dr. Mohammad Salem, Dr. Sultan Mohammad, Dr. Kyaw Naing and Dr. Paul Hibbert.

PROFILE



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for 60 years. Now 93, he still is on board of directors for the county mental health center. The memories continue with photos of young Penny, her brother and sister growing up and later, their children’s special events. Many pages are yet to be filled.

Scrapbooking with friends gives Dr. Tippy time to refresh herself and her relationships. She’s created many books for friends, from wedding albums, baby books, family remembrances, sporting events and more, piecing together a visual legacy for the West Frankfort community as much as she is building up the community’s health care.

From spending time with her patients, family, friends, as well as putting in time to create methods of better health care for patients and creating keepsakes that will last for generations, Dr. Tippy has made time for others. “She is

helping make change in the community,” concurs social worker Yolanda Gunzel. In everything she does, Dr. Tippy is continuing a family mantra, a quote attributed to numerous philanthropists, from Jane Deeter Ripplin (national executive director of the Girl Scouts) to Martin Luther King Jr.: “Service is the rent we pay for the space we occupy on earth.”

In her small corner of the earth in West Frankfort, Dr. Tippy’s rent is well paid. ■

Above left: “She was a tomboy,” Goebel Patton says of his daughter. “She’s a good girl.” Mr. Patton, 93, lives in a log cabin house in the rural part of town. The local community center was recently named in his honor. Dr. Tippy, her husband, Roger, their two sons, her brother and his family, and Mr. Patton continue a family tradition of meeting for church and lunch every Sunday.