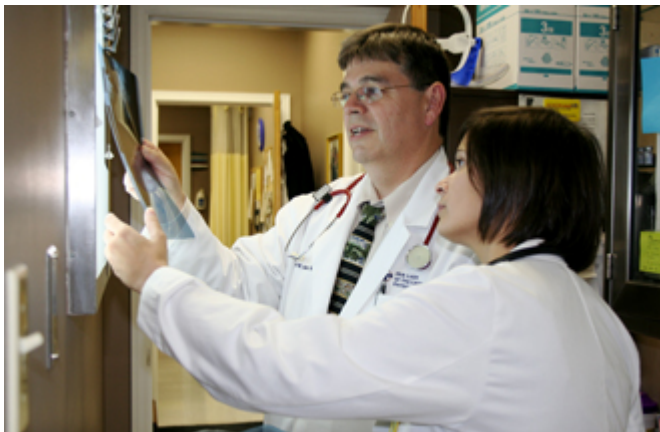


Big Lessons in Small Town Medicine

December 13, 2010 10:45 AM Keith Brannon

kbrannon@tulane.edu

While medical student Valerie Cagle's third-year clinical experience may be in a small town, the amount of work and experience is anything but. She not only sees patients daily at one of the busiest family medicine practices in rural New Roads, La., but she also spearheads the local school district's anti-obesity campaign to get children more physically fit.



Third-year medical student Valerie Cagle, right, looking over X-rays with Dr. Paul Rachal, helps provide needed medical care in rural New Roads, La., and leads an effort to combat childhood obesity. (Photo by Keith Brannon)

Cagle recently organized the district's "Fall Into Fitness" health fair that enlisted more than 37 community partners to set up information booths, screening areas and activities for children throughout Point Coupee Parish, an area about 100 miles northeast of New Orleans. The Dec. 4 event attracted more than 300 people in a parish with a population of around 5,000.

“It turned out to be bigger than I anticipated,” says Cagle, who is part of the [Tulane Rural Immersion Program](#) (TRIP), an initiative that sends students to rural communities for their entire third year at the [Tulane University School of Medicine](#).

Students in the Tulane Family Medicine Group participated in the health fair, running a “Teddy Bear Clinic” to teach kids about health checkups using their stuffed animals as patients. The event featured mobile health units and promoted the availability of health services in the parish.



Students in the Tulane Family Medicine Group run a “Teddy Bear Clinic” to teach kids about health checkups using their stuffed animals as patients. (Photo by Dr. Richard Streiffer)

Cagle is one of the first students to participate in the TRIP program, which began this year. She moved with her husband and four children to New Roads this past summer to work with Dr. Paul Rachal.

Since Point Coupee Parish lacks specialists, the family practice physician sees a very high volume of patients of all ages — men, women and children — for a variety of health problems.

For Cagle, the experience is invaluable and could lead to a calling in rural medicine.

“In Point Coupee parish, they don't have a single pediatrician so it's conceivable that a student like me could eventually graduate and become a pediatrician and return to the community where I trained,” she said.