

Heppner's Growing Healthcare Community

A story about a rural eastern Oregon town investing in its own children to sustain healthcare access close to home.



Petra Payne
Spanish/Health/Careers Teacher
Heppner Jr/Sr High School



Paul Lindsay
OHSU School of Nursing Student
Heppner Jr/Sr High School Class of 2023



Emily Jack, MD
Physician, Pioneer Memorial Hospital
Heppner Jr/Sr High School Class of 2010

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Pioneer Memorial Hospital, part of the Morrow County Health District, is the smallest hospital in Oregon. It's in Heppner, a very small and rural town. Located 45 miles south of Hermiston, the population is under 1,200 and there's just a few small communities surrounding it.

People love living there. They don't mind being so far away from everything else because they have such a strong sense of belonging, which starts young.

Petra Payne teaches at the high school. According to her,

“Our school is the center of the community.”

She has watched local businesses work with students on their professional development and local people come to all of the school's events, and Petra works hard to support Heppner students as each one of them takes her Spanish, Health, and Careers classes.

Petra has partnered with NEOAHEC for the last seven years to expand health career exploration opportunities for kids in Heppner.



One of her students, Paul Lindsay, recently moved to La Grande to attend nursing school. He had always thought he would find himself in a career like one of his parents, a feed lot farmer and a crop insurance adjuster, but after attending NEOAHEC's MedQuest summer camp, he picked a different path.

“My mom wanted to be a nurse, so I feel like I'm kind of carrying on that dream.”

Since he started nursing school, two of his younger siblings have decided they want to be nurses, too. Paul's sister was also a part of MedQuest on her journey into nursing.



Another one of Petra's students, Emily Jack, came from a family of cattle ranchers, going back 5 generations on one side and 6 on the other. She has been deeply involved with NEOAHEC since attending OHSU, even helping to create a new program that introduced people to rural healthcare.

After completing her residency, she moved back to the area and began practicing family medicine in Pendleton. She spent this time working with health professions students as they rotated through eastern Oregon, taking on 6-8 students a year.

She recently accepted a new position at the hospital in Heppner as both Medical Director for the Clinic and the Hospital and Medical Director for Hospice and Home Health.

She will continue to practice as she is able, and she plans to continue to take on students. Even though it seems like a lot, Emily always wanted to end up back home to raise her family and to make a difference for her community. "Luckily, I just work with a lot of really talented people... We've all trained for different things.

"I really lean on everybody to work as a team. It's not all on me by any means."

Emily plans to take students into the practice to help them become more confident in rural primary care. She has always invited people to become part of the community, but this time she can focus on showing them what life is like in her own hometown. She plans to invite them to local events, like their town's big St. Patrick's Day celebration, or to even visit her family and see what it's like to brand cattle.

"There was a time when young people weren't moving home because they didn't have jobs," added Petra. But now the investment the community has made in growing their own is proving successful.

"We are seeing health providers come home."

It takes a village of people willing to work hard to create a community. Petra, Paul, and Emily are just three of the people who play an important part of Heppner's health career pathway. And they're not alone - more Heppner residents like Emily and Paul are heading into health professions programs and coming home.

Heppner, Oregon

