

The end of one journey, beginning of another

Written by By Holly J. Wagner Sun Correspondent
Friday, 29 December 2023 00:00



It's been a long road for Dr. Chris Gonzaga and, while it's not at the end, he's due for some well deserved family time, rest and recreation.

Gonzaga retired from Rehoboth McKinley Christian Hospital Dec. 8 after a 40-year career in medicine that included 26 years at RMCH. Over those years he's become known for his compassion, bedside manner and as a tireless advocate for quality health care in McKinley County.

"Dr. Gonzaga has been a family doctor for us, for my entire family, for 20 years. He has become more like family and that is one of his great attributes," longtime Gallup resident and Gallup-McKinley Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Bill Lee said. "When my father was terminally ill, he made it a point to stop by our house and visit with him."

Indeed, house calls – a rarity in modern American medicine – are one of the things that set Gonzaga apart. It's important to him to treat the whole patient, not just medical conditions, so home visits helped him better understand his patients and their situations.

"There are some patients that are disabled and come to see you. It's more practical for the patients and their families to have the medical care at home," Gonzaga said, adding he enjoys

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house calls and occasionally even took his guitar with him to play and sing for patients.

“When you see people in the clinic it’s 15 minutes. It’s a snapshot,” he said, while adding home visits allow him to stay with patients longer and get a fuller picture.

Over his career in the region he has helped organize recruiting trips to the Philippines that resulted in many people emigrating to be nurses and teachers in Gallup and on the Navajo Reservation. Many of those recruits are still on the job.

“When we came to Rehoboth, people liked what we were doing so they went to the Philippines to recruit nurses. Some of the other staff are still from that bunch,” Gonzaga said. “One of my patients became a recruiter for teachers. We have 200 to 300 Filipino teachers here and on the reservation because of that.”

The connection was more meaningful, he said, when he learned that a group of Navajo soldiers were sent to the Philippines during World War II.

More recently, patients may remember Gonzaga as the coordinator for RMCH’s COVID-19 response. He even gave his cell phone number to patients to make sure they could get care quickly if they needed it.

Dr. Val Wangler, who later left RMCH to found Gallup Community Health, worked alongside Gonzaga managing COVID incident command.

“Chris was absolutely unwavering in his determination to make sure every patient received the very best care and treatment we could provide,” she said. “He worked tirelessly through that time, regularly sleeping only a couple of hours at night, making sure he understood all the latest science and recommendations to help keep us all safe. This was just one part of his long and amazing career, but the amazing work ethic and nonstop kindness and compassion that he brought to the most difficult of times was truly remarkable.”

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Devout Christians, the Gonzagas came to Gallup literally on a mission. He and his wife, Dr. Flor Caballar-Gonzaga, both trained as physicians in their native Philippines. Caballar-Gonzaga, who also spent many years at RMCH, retired in 2021. While visiting family in New Jersey in 1991, they were persuaded to extend their visit, which eventually led to a decision to stay in the U.S.

They applied for longer-term work visas and found it. While Gonzaga was certified in cardiology and Caballar-Gonzaga had specialties in neurology, pediatrics, sleep medicine and electrophysiology, they both began their careers in Gallup as primary care doctors.

They later had to seek waivers of a visa condition that would have required them to return to the Philippines for two years before applying for U.S. residency. When it was time to apply, an employer sponsor “dropped the ball” and a paperwork issue landed them in Juárez, Mexico, to process their green card applications. They found Gallup during that time, when a friend who had moved from the Philippines a year earlier invited them to visit.

All along they’d been following their own calling to service and their faith to a place where they felt a connection. The Rehoboth story and history felt right to them, and Gallupians made them feel welcome. It took six years to get legal residency, then they had to wait another five years to apply for citizenship. They were naturalized in 2008.

“Gallup is a wonderful place. You find a lot of friends and people who share interests. We have a lot of really generous people,” Gonzaga said.

He and his wife will spend the next few months visiting family in the U.S. and the Philippines.

The youngest of seven children, Gonzaga wants to spend time with his elder siblings, four of whom live in the Philippines, while he can. He and his brother missed out on a chance to take a coast-to-coast train trip across the U.S. many years ago, so part of the plan is for them to spend time exploring their home country together.

Gonzaga has no plans to leave Gallup behind, or to stop advocating for health care and

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education here.

“When I come back to Gallup I want to advocate for our medical community and teachers,” he said. “We have a lot of things going on with health care now. ... We have to be in existence because there is a lot of need in the community. We need to take care of you. You can’t afford to go to Grants or Albuquerque, you need to have your care here.”

Lee is just one of the people who’s happy to hear that.

“He is such a true champion for health care in our community,” Lee said. “I wish him the best and want to thank him for all he’s done for health care and families here.”

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