

This 'Giant' Scared No Child

Pediatrician, Who Has Seen Once-Rural Area Grow, to Retire

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A few decades ago, Thomas P. McGorry, the second pediatrician to hang a shingle in Loudoun County, was called upon to treat copperhead bites, measles, whooping cough and meningitis.

Nearly 35 years later, the farm community he settled down to serve is a fast-paced, affluent suburb and children's health problems have evolved. Throughout his career, McGorry has helped diagnose diseases and treat children with illnesses

both complicated and common, including AIDS, Rocky Mountain spotted fever, diabetes and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. As he prepares to retire this spring, he leaves a vastly changed medical community behind.

"In medicine we talk about the days of giants. We can talk about him in the same way," said Damon Moore, one of three partners in McGorry's practice, Pediatric Healthcare. "He has treated a lot of things I have not even seen."



McGorry was the second pediatrician to set up shop in Loudoun, and is planning to retire in March. There will be an open house March 2 at his Sterling office.



Pediatrician Thomas McGorry, who moved to the county in 1974, examines Nicholas Crandell, 8, of Leesburg.

McGorry estimates that there are about 65 pediatricians in the county and enough children to keep every one of them busy.

To celebrate his retirement, McGorry's partners are having an open house at his Sterling office from 2 to 4 p.m. March 2 for families that would like to wish him well.

McGorry, 65, who also has an office in Leesburg, decided to become a doctor when he was 4. It was an unusual career choice in his immigrant neighborhood in Philadelphia, where most boys were raised to be "a cop, a priest or a bookie," he said.

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McGorry talks to Maria Bianchi, who brought her son Nichols Crandall for a visit. The doctor said he wants to stay involved in medicine after he retires.

His decision was based on a box of cherries, he said. One day, while shopping with his mother at a produce market, he wanted to buy some cherries, but his mother said they were too expensive. When he asked why another boy was eating them, his mother looked at the boy's fur-coated mother and said the boy's father was a doctor, McGorry recalled.

He told that story during his medical school interview at Hahnemann University in Philadelphia and got in. He went on to specialize in pediatrics because he loves kids, he said.

He completed a pediatrics residency in Wilmington, Delaware, and then was drafted into the U.S. Air Force, where he tended to the children of jet fighter pilots at a base in Las Vegas. After another residency at a 525-bed pediatric hospital in Oklahoma City, he set up his practice in Loudoun, joining his friend John J. McGovern, a fellow resident in Wilmington and the county's first pediatrician. McGovern retired a few years ago.

When McGorry moved to the county in 1974 with his family, there was one restaurant in Leesburg and one stop light between the county seat and Tysons Corner, he recalled.

As the county grew, so did his expertise and his practice. He learned to examine infants in their mothers' arms and to blow bubbles to distract toddlers so they would not fuss in the exam room. He read medical journals constantly to keep up with the changing field, and he attended conferences, sometimes several a year, to learn about new diseases and treatments. Over time, he gained a reputation as an excellent diagnostician, someone who could identify even the most exotic diseases.

In the mid-1980s, McGorry started a practice in Sterling Park. About that time, Marion Smedberg, a Sterling mother of seven, started bringing her children to him.



Dr. Thomas McGorry writes down notes about patient Nicholas Crandall, 8, of Leesburg, who was with his mother, Maria Bianchi, on Friday afternoon.

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"As we got more and more kids, we kept going to him," she said. "There were times he picked out toys so they could play with them."

Smedberg liked him because she could relate to him as a parent, she said. "He used to call himself the daddy doctor, because he had four kids," she said. "He always used to say, 'This is what I would do for my kids.' "

As she got to know him better, she began to share parenting concerns as well as health issues, seeking advice or commiseration when her boys came home with speeding tickets, for example, or when one or another of her children did not want to go to church.

Another longtime customer, Patti Durkin of Sterling, said she appreciated the "personal service" he provided to her family. One of her children has chronic health problems. At six months old, he got an infection and was running a high fever. McGorry met them at a Loudoun hospital in the middle of the night and had the boy air-lifted to Children's National Medical Center for treatment.

Another former patient and longtime Loudoun resident, Donnie Legg, whose wife is a nurse in McGorry's office, said he started seeing the doctor in the 1970s when he was 12 or 13 and had a diagnosis of diabetes.



Thomas McGorry is known for his ability to relate to his patients and their parents. Here he wears a Bugs Bunny bandage on his thumb.



Dr. Thomas McGorry, shown here in his Leesburg office, is retiring March 1 after working for 34 years as a pediatrician in Loudoun County.

"It was quite a struggle growing up with that," Legg said. McGorry "helped me understand that it wasn't a death sentence. . . . It's just an illness that you have to deal with," he said.

On a recent visit to McGorry's Leesburg office, the waiting room was decorated like the seashore, with tropical fish painted on the walls. McGorry was wearing a Winnie the Pooh tie. The files for the nearly 7,000 patients were stored from floor to ceiling on rotating shelves.

After he retires, McGorry and his wife of 41 years, Joan, are planning to spend more time with their grandchildren and their winters in a new house in South Carolina. But McGorry said he does not want to stray too far from medicine. He hopes to volunteer at the Loudoun County Health Department clinic.