

Radiology director returns to rural healthcare

As Jacobson Memorial Hospital Care Center's (JMHCC) new radiology director, Ryan Hager relishes returning to rural health care.

Hager is at the helm of JMHCC's imaging department, which handles everything from routine X-rays to complex CT scans.

Hager joins JMHCC following a dedicated and lengthy search by JMHCC to secure a radiologic technologist as core staff, rather than relying on temporary traveling personnel, and Hager's presence now ensures consistent leadership for the department.

"I have a skillset that maybe hasn't been here for a while and that can be useful. Being valued from that perspective was really a driving factor," he says. "I knew I was going to a place that needed me and where I could be useful and still staying within that critical access, community healthcare kind of situation. ... I feel valued here."

While working as a traveling radiologic technologist himself, Hager became familiar with JMHCC during a 13-week rotation.

"I feel I made a positive impact when I was here, and the organization made a positive impact on me," he says. "I felt there was going to be a comfort level going in, the fact that they remembered me. ... The fact that we can make something work out for me, work out for Elgin, work out for my family, made all of the pieces fall into place."

Hager and his wife, who has been teaching for 26 years, have two daughters. The oldest is majoring in music at the University of North Dakota and the youngest is in middle school.

With his family ensconced in Grand Forks, Hager stays in Elgin Wednesday through Saturday morning, then commutes back to Grand Forks, where he has lived since he was an eighth-grader when his family returned to their North Dakota roots from southern California.

His path into radiology began with his own encounter with a radiologic technologist as a patient.

"I had a pretty bad accident when I was 19 rollerblading and broke my arm. And I remember the technologist that did my X-rays, so that had a significant profound effect on me," he says.

Following that encounter, Hager attended the Northland Community & Technical College's (NCTC) radiology program, graduating in 2001, then starting his career at Altru Health System in Grand Forks.

"There was like 130% turnover in the imaging department at Altru, so I quickly went from being a student to the senior tech within a year," he says. He also became an onsite clinical instructor for NCTC.

"It was definitely baptism by fire," he says. After 11 years there, including eight years as the lead technologist, Hager accepted a radiology director role at RiverView Health in Crookston, Minn., a 25-bed critical access hospital, where he led all the modalities,

including CT, X-ray, MRI, ultrasound, mammography, nuclear medicine and echocardiogram.

“I do have a significant amount of leadership experience, and while I was working as a director, I went back to college and finished my degree in healthcare management and administration,” he says.

He served as radiology director there for almost 12 years, before entering the private health sector with a mobile imaging company.

But critical access health care was where his heart still belonged.

“I really found out by going to RiverView Health that I have a passion for critical access healthcare,” he says.

“In large hospitals, especially in radiology departments, you run the risk of radiology becoming the McDonald’s of the hospital. You just move them in, move them out, next patient. . . . So, I definitely developed a passion for smaller healthcare, because you have an opportunity to really affect the care of the patient. That definitely was something that I was connected to. I went into healthcare to take care of people,” he says.

“I think that you develop a rapport with the providers and the nurses and the leadership team in a small hospital that you don’t in large hospital,” he says. “I worked at Altru for 11 years, and probably within my last two years, I finally had a name. Otherwise, you go into the OR and the surgeons just call you X-ray.”

Hager now finds his niche at JMHCC, following his family’s footsteps in service as teachers and nurses.

“Being of service is very important in my family, so my wife went into education and I went into healthcare,” he says. “Having that connection definitely connected me to small-town care.”