

CHEROKEE PHOENIX

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Cherokee improves eye care on reservations

By Will Chavez

PARKER, Ariz. – Cmdr. Dawn Kelly, a uniformed officer of the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps, has been improving eye health at Indian reservations in Arizona for the past 12 years.

As an optometrist working for the Colorado River Service Unit, the Cherokee citizen provides care from five different health centers along the Colorado River. The main clinic, where she maintains her office, is the Parker Indian Health Center that serves the Mojave, Chemehuevi, Navajo and Hopi tribes. North of Parker, in the Mojave Valley area, the Fort Mohave Tribe is served. Kelly and her staff also serve the Hualapai, who live northeast of Parker.

“You don’t necessarily have a variety of health professionals in these remote areas. The people I work with are just wonderful. Knowing that I’m working with a good group of people in a remote setting is probably what has kept me out here for 12 years,” Kelly said.

The Havasupai tribe is the most remote tribe she serves. After a four-hour drive from Parker, she takes a seven-minute helicopter ride into a canyon to the Supai community where the tribe lives. She visits the tribe for one week every three months to provide optometry care.

Kelly said she had never heard of the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps while growing up in Muskogee, Okla., much less thought about joining a uniformed service. Today, as a corps commander, she serves the Indian Health Service as the district chief of optometry in Parker.

Her responsibilities include overseeing a team of eye doctors, nurses and technicians at five IHS health clinics. Nearly 5,000 clinical visits and 500 patient consultations per year keep the clinics busy. In addition to her clinic duties, Kelly rounds out her daily schedule by providing advice and medical support to the local Head Start programs that serve young students in need and educating high school students in the area about career options, including those provided through the Commissioned Corps.

She could have left Parker after four years, after she fulfilled her obligation to the IHS for providing her optometry training. The Commissioned Corps provides an opportunity for its professionals to transfer to other areas in the country, but Kelly, now 45, said she has found the place where she wants to live and work. She said she and her husband Danny enjoy the outdoor activities available in western Arizona.

“Sometimes you get into these locations where the communities are so wonderful to work with, and you don’t really want to transfer, and they don’t want you to transfer because everybody likes that continuity of care. You get a chance to develop relationships with these people,” she said.

As a Cherokee, Kelly views her job of caring for the eye health needs of Native Americans living on five reservations – two of which are designated as isolated hardship locations – as “taking care of family.”

She said she has numerous patients who stand out in her mind. One, in particular, was a 2-year-old boy who stumbled a lot.

“I had the opportunity to evaluate a very shy and quiet 2-year-old boy whose mother described him as clumsy. After an eye exam, he was found to be so farsighted that he had trouble seeing in any range,” she said. “At his six-month follow-up visit, he leapt from his mother’s lap when I called his name and ran up and hugged my leg, his bright smile beaming. His mother said that her son would cry if anyone tried to remove his spectacles before he fell asleep.”

Kelly graduated from the Northeastern State University School of Optometry located in Tahelquah, Okla., in 1994.

“I had always had an interest in sciences and math. I always knew I was going to go into some health care field,” she said.

Before she attended optometry school, she said she earned a psychology degree at NSU and realized she had gotten “sidetracked” from what she truly wanted to do.

“I wasn’t helping patients in a concrete fashion that I was comfortable with, so I decided to go back to school and get my prerequisite for either medical school or optometry,” she said. “The other part of it was what my own personal disposition. I always knew I wanted to work from the neck up, that interested me more, so I ended up going to optometry school because that met my personal needs better. And it’s been a great choice. I love what I do.”

After graduating with her optometry degree, she chose to go into the USPHS and work in Parker. Summer temperatures in the area can reach 120 degrees or more, but the winters are mild, she said.

“I probably spend more time inside in the summer,” she said.

She said when she first arrived in Parker, all the clinic settings were “very old” and space was limited to see patients. Since then four of the five clinical settings she works in have been totally rebuilt and modernized.

“I had a lot of input as far as the design of those particular eye clinics in deciding what equipment we would have. So consolidating things and making things much easier for patients, giving them a much better variety in the types of services they can receive at the eye clinics and making it more convenient for them is probably the biggest thing I feel like I’ve accomplished since I’ve been out here,” she said.

Although the equipment and facilities have improved in the past 12 years, in many ways Kelly said the needs of the Native Americans she serves haven’t changed. “I have seen first hand the profound sense of both pride and powerlessness that these people feel,” she said. “As a result, my patients suffer both physical and emotional illness and decreased life expectancy.”

Kelly’s work in the Commissioned Corps not only focuses on primary eye care. She is also a member of a multidisciplinary “Diabetes Team” of providers. As diabetes prevention, diagnosis and treatment increases in importance throughout the U.S., Kelly’s team works with its patients to increase the number of annual diabetes-related patient visits. The Phoenix Area IHS has recognized the team’s multidisciplinary approach to diabetes care as a “Best Practice.”

In addition, the commissioned officers on the team have been recognized with unit commendation awards for their efforts and innovation in dealing with this critical health issue.

“I am proud to be a Native American officer of the USPHS providing primary eye care to the Native American communities I serve, mentoring new officers, encouraging high school students to pursue health care careers, performing Head Start vision screening exams and participating in local health fairs,” she said. “I am blessed to have the privilege of serving those in need. This is who I am and what I do.”