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## Vista Living of Vernon

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# Wilbarger General Medical Group

By Kathy McClellan

With an obvious need for more health care professionals to serve the population of Vernon and the surrounding area, Wilbarger General Hospital formed the Wilbarger General Medical Group in 2016 and hospital CEO Claudia Eisenmann made recruiting new physicians and mid-level practitioners a top priority. By January of 2017 five health care providers had joined the medical group and that number had increased to six by September.

"We were very fortunate to secure this tremendous group of physicians and nurse practitioners to join us here at Wilbarger General Hospital," Eisenmann said. "It is wonderful for Vernon to have the collective expertise of this group of exceptional medical providers. Their competent and compassionate care have allowed us to expand access to primary and general surgical care throughout our service area."

A key addition to the WG Medical Group was Vernon native Dr. Travis Lehman, a Board Certified internal medicine specialist, who joined Wilbarger General as Medical Director and Director of the Hospitalist Program.

In addition to Dr. Lehman, WG Medical Group welcomed Board Certified general surgeon, Dr. John Lang and nurse practitioners Kelly Vasquez, Kimberly Babb, Veronika Harris and Hazel Brantley. All of the medical group members, with the exception of Kimberly Babb who works as a hospitalist, have clinic practices and see patients in their private offices.

"Through the work of the members of our medical group we are able to offer residents a variety of different options for their health care needs. We have clinics for internal medicine/primary care, general surgery and family practice, along with the walk-in clinic," Eisenmann said. "And, we are actively recruiting for another primary care physician."

Championing the growth of the WG Medical Group, Dr. Lehman, wanted to return to his hometown and his hometown hospital after seeing first-hand the extent to which a strong rural hospital can make a positive difference in a rural community. For two years Dr. Lehman worked at the Huron Regional Medical Center in Huron, S.D. and was surrounded by physicians who had returned to work in their hometown.

"Most of the physicians at Huron were from there or towns close by, and they were there to keep health care services available to the region where they grew up," he explained. "Huron Regional is very much like Wilbarger General in size, and Huron is also similar to Vernon in size. I saw what those physicians were able to accomplish and bring to Huron, and I knew that could be done here at Wilbarger General."

"I have always wanted to come back to Vernon and this is a very good opportunity. Wilbarger General was already making big changes and improvements, and was offering more services, and I wanted to be a part of that."

Dr. Lehman oversees WGH's hospitalist program and works as a hospitalist along with seeing patients in his internal medicine/primary care practice.

Dr. Lang was working for Indian Health Services in Sitka, Alaska before accepting a position with the WGH Medical Group. Certified by the American Board of Surgery, Dr. Lang is a general surgeon, but specializes in colon and rectal surgery, specifically endoscopy, laparoscopic surgery and management of inflammatory bowel disease.

"My wife and I are both 'small town people' and Vernon is exactly the right size for us," Dr. Lang said. "We fell in love with Vernon during our visit, both the town and the people. I'm very happy to be here at Wilbarger General Hospital and to be a part of these exciting times as we continue to grow and provide key health care services to this area."

While working as an LVN and RN, Kimberly Babb continued pursuing her education, graduating with a bachelor degree nursing in 2013 and her MSN Family Nurse Practitioner degree in 2016. Coming from the small West Texas town of Mertzon, Kimberly was looking to work in a rural area and that was one of the main reasons she accepted a position with the medical group.

"We chose Vernon because it is a rural town with some big-city amenities," she said. "I love that it is a ranching community. I love the small town life. I also love working in the hospital as a hospitalist. I love being on the floor and caring for the patients while they are in the hospital."

Working in a rural setting also appealed to Veronika Harris, who joined the medical group in August. Veronika worked as a nurse for over 15 years in Lubbock before deciding to become a family nurse practitioner. Once Harris decided to become a family nurse practitioner, her focus was on rural health care.

"Family nurse practitioners are vital to rural health care," she said. "I love taking care of families and patients of all ages."

"I'm excited about what is going on at Wilbarger General and the growth that we have seen," Veronika continued. "There is such an opportunity here to develop a practice how I envisioned it, which is treating patients of any age for the health care needs that they have."

Kelly Vasquez is the primary health care provider at the WGH Walk-In Clinic and is experienced in treating adult and pediatric (3 months and older) illnesses and conditions that do not require the level of care delivered in an emergency room.

"I like the life of working in a walk-in/urgent care clinic," Kelly said. "It's either feast or famine. We'll either see eight in a day or 28. You never know what to expect. It has been great here. I really enjoy it."

The newest member of the WG Medical Group is Hazel Brantley, who worked as the Director of the WGH Dialysis Center while pursuing her nurse practitioner degree. Hazel earned that degree in August of 2017, received her license and began working as a nurse practitioner in October.

While the WG Medical Group has made a big impact on ensuring all Vernon and area residents have access to health care, Eisenmann said there is still work to be done in this area.

"Recruiting health care providers was the top priority for us in fiscal year 2017, and during that time we were able to bring six very knowledgeable and qualified health care professionals in to join us," Eisenmann said. "We are very happy and pleased to have them on board with us and look forward to working with them to add medical programs and services that that will keep our community healthier and allow residents to obtain quality care close to home."