

Cheryl Seymour, M.D., '01: Family, farm

By Andrew Clark

Cheryl Seymour grew up on a 100-acre farm in Howard County, Md., a distant hour away from Washington, D.C., and Baltimore, so perhaps it's not surprising that even as a physician she hasn't left farm life behind.

Over the course of her career, Seymour has blended her background in farming with an interest in providing care to those who might not otherwise receive it by working with one of the country's least visible populations: migrant farm workers. "There's this great scarcity of resources out there," she says. "So there is this great need to provide help."

As medical director of the Maine Migrant Health Program (MMHP), Seymour spends much of her time bringing health care to the state's migrant farm workers. But that's just one of the roles Seymour fills. She also practices and teaches at the Maine-Dartmouth Family Medicine Residency Program in Augusta, Maine.

The trip from a farm in Maryland to caring for farm workers in Maine didn't happen overnight, but Seymour has long had an interest in providing care in rural areas. As an undergraduate at Duke, she became fascinated with the field of telemedicine—the use of technology to provide medical care at a distance. Seymour came across telemedicine in the context of its use by the military, but she saw the possibility of applying it to care for rural populations as well.

In 1998, during her first year of medical school, a chance encounter helped move her in the right direction. "I went to see Dr. Jim Yong Kim speak," Seymour recalls. At the time, Kim was deeply involved in the international health organization Partners in Health. He later served as president of Dartmouth College before leaving to become president of the World Bank. "After he gave his lecture, I went up to him and asked him for career advice," Seymour says. "He told me to learn Spanish.

"Being part of the program really opened up a number of possibilities."

I had filed that advice away. But when it came time to pick a residency, I chose one in Lawrence, Mass., where Spanish would be necessary."

During her time at Dartmouth, Seymour studied abroad at the Probigua Language School in Antigua, Guatemala, and spent time working at a community health clinic in El Rosario, Honduras.

But it was another formative opportunity that helped lead to Seymour's current role with MMHP. While at Dartmouth, Seymour was one of the founding members of the Rural Health Scholars Program.

This program, which continues today, selects several students each year who are interested in providing medical care to rural populations. Seymour says the program was instrumental in developing her ability to work with migrant workers. The program provided a number of opportunities, including lectures from guest speakers and trips, such as her visit to Guatemala and Honduras.



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The past and present of the Rural Health Scholars: Cheryl Seymour (kneeling, right) poses with members of the Maine Migrant Health Program staff and three current Geisel students, Karl Dietrich (back row, second from left), Meaghan Kennedy (back row, third from left), and Holly Schroeder (back row, fourth from left).

"Being part of the program really opened up a number of possibilities," Seymour says.

One of the most important parts of the program was simply the community it fostered. "The Rural Health Scholars provided me with great support throughout medical school," she says. "It was really nice to have a home base and to be around people who were always supportive. The individuals in the program were really into working in an underserved community."

Cathleen Morrow, M.D., an associate professor of community and family medicine who was the director of the Rural Health Scholars Program from 2008 to 2012, has been elated to see what Seymour has achieved since medical school. In her eyes, Seymour's efforts represent everything the program was intended to accomplish.

"Cheryl's work with the Maine Migrant Program is great, and it's exactly what we hope to see," says Morrow. "The work she's doing is as rich and rewarding as you can find. There's a lot of hard work that goes into it. But the goal of the program is to help and inspire people to ultimately work in the field."

After graduating from medical school, Seymour began her residency at the Greater Lawrence Family Health Center in Lawrence, Mass., a city in the northern part of the state with a large Latino population. Practicing in Lawrence was an important part of her development as a physician, Seymour says, in part because she had the opportunity to sharpen her Spanish skills.

In 2004, Seymour joined the Maine-Dartmouth Family Medicine Residency in Augusta on a one-year fellowship in geriatrics. At about the same time, she sought out an opportunity to get involved with helping provide care to migrant farm workers. She began volunteering for MMHP in 2004. Five years later she was named medical director for the program, which is the only organization in the state dedicated to providing care to farm workers. Each year more than 1,000 patients receive care from MMHP, which has turned vans into mobile health clinics in order