

Rural Health Lifetime Achievement Award

What has the individual done to contribute to rural health in ways that go “above and beyond”?

Rural health is defined as the interdisciplinary study of health and health care delivery in rural environments. Rural areas often lack access to healthcare, generally have a large population of elderly people and children, and tend to have poor socioeconomic conditions. Dr. Robert S. Ross (Dr. Bob) made a commitment very early in life to not allow Ortonville to become another rural statistic.

Following High School, College, Medical School, and Family Practice Residency graduations, Dr. Bob found himself back in Ortonville, where he was born and raised, the Monday after completing Residency in July 1977. The handshake agreement between the only other practicing physician in town and Dr. Bob was the first of many occasions of him going above and beyond to improving rural health for our community.

As a physician, Dr. Bob can be found going above and beyond for his patients daily. He continues to provide home visits when the need arises, escorts patients to their vehicles to ensure their safety, and provides smoking cessation free-of-charge for all participating patients. Dr. Bob provides prenatal care, delivers babies (1,472 to be exact), and cares for the children from their first well-baby check to their college physical. He manages their health through adulthood, mending injuries, curing acute sickness, and managing their chronic diseases. Besides clinical medical care, Dr. Bob is able to care for his patients and the family of his patients in the context of knowing their history, their values, and their wishes; the culmination of this allows him to go above and beyond for his patients from their first to their last breath.

Dr. Bob is fully invested and integrated to the Ortonville community. As a former foster parent, he keeps in close contact with those that shared his home, still providing that parenting role when needed. At church you will find Dr. Bob tending to the children in the nursery or washing dishes after a potluck meal. He is present at all High School home football and basketball games as the sideline physician, offering gratis medical care to players and fans alike. Dr. Bob often sports a flight jacket that was gifted to him from a fellow partner, who Dr. Bob supported while on deployments, this jacket proudly displays unit patches from patients and Veterans, and the Air National Guard Medical Services.

At OAHS, Dr. Bob hosts a daily “Code Fitness” opportunity inviting (via overhead paging system) staff, partners, visiting specialists, and patients to take a break before lunch and join him in five minutes of physical exercise and strength training. He promotes healthy eating and habits to all employees and enjoys a good fitness or weight loss challenge.

In 1989, Dr. Bob had the vision to see changes coming in rural health care and recognized the need to “take hold of the community’s health care future”. To this, the Big Stone Health Care Foundation was created and established. Dr. Bob, along with his partners, became the lead donors to the Foundation which has financially supported thousands of people in obtaining health care degrees and recruited numerous medical professionals to OAHS. Dr. Bob continues to regularly support the Foundation throughout its 30 years as a Charter Board Member, personal donor, and as the motivational speaker at the annual Gala.

Dr. Bob is a proud teacher and mentor to students of U/MN Medical School Rural Physician Associates Program and UND’s Rural Opportunity Medical Education, teaching every student about family medicine, rural medicine and how great OAHS is. Dr. Bob is invested in student education as well as retaining gifted students who share his passions, passions that allow him to go above and beyond every single day. Prior to the start of the Foundation, Dr. Bob recruited and sponsored nurses to pursue Nurse Practitioner education and certification, and continues to sponsor an academic scholarship to the top science student, based on merit, in each graduating class at Ortonville High School. The stories of how Dr. Bob impacts others are endless. OAHS recently recruited a first-year pharmacist; Dr. Bob offered friendship to Seth the first day they made introductions. As a young, single person who is hours from his hometown, Seth joins Dr. Bob at all hometown sporting events. Dr. Bob invests in the people within our community; at the first sight of potential, Dr. Bob will be the offering to help you grow.

How have they demonstrated leadership and vision for rural health?

In the early days of medicine, physicians took the name “doctor” because it meant “teacher” as it was viewed as an inseparable part of their role. Dr. Bob’s leadership and vision for rural health starts with teaching and is a trait he exercises well.

Behind the scenes, OAHS has created a team-based approach for patient care. Dr. Bob, being the senior partner of the practice (a title he received only eight years into his career), is paired with green clinicians and mentors them to realize their full potential as rural health care professionals. Dr. Bob teaches his students and partners the value of a town doctor who knows local kids, neighbors, their stories, and how this personal knowledge and enduring rapport can help patients to obtain health goals. It’s these relationships that help his patients decide when to keep fighting illness or when to accept the inevitable. He teaches the duality of medicine as both a science and an art; Dr. Bob employs the evidence-based science while never overlooking the therapeutic value of a simple home visit.

At the age of 70, Dr. Bob still works five-days a week (and sees on average 8% more patients than any other partner), takes call, loves what he does, and wears many hats: senior partner, Foundation President, Medical Staff President, Big Stone County Coroner; the list goes on. Each hat also presented someone who wanted to learn from him. Being the senior partner of the practice, Dr. Bob has been grooming his partners on “what OAHS looks like without Bob”; he continues to teach his partners new things daily whether it is through discussion of clinical topics or hands-on demonstrations of surgical procedures.

Dr. Bob demonstrates what his vision of comprehensive care is to his partners: It’s providing pre-natal care, delivering babies, and caring for children from their first well-baby check to their college physical. It’s managing their health throughout adulthood, mending injuries, curing acute sickness, and managing their chronic diseases. Whether they need the clinic, the ER, the hospital, the operating room, or the nursing home, Dr. Bob’s patients can count on him being there. He teaches his partners to share laughter, tears, and prayers with patients, and when to simply put the stethoscope down and just be there with the patient’s family in the time of need.

Dr. Bob also teaches others the importance of leadership within the community and the importance of family to all others. During his three sons’ younger years, Dr. Bob began a before-school basketball program which he ran for seven years from October to April from 6:30-8 am each morning. While he created this program wishing to spend more time with his sons doing something they loved, it evolved into a getting hundreds of kids, regardless of skill or financial ability, to be active, build confidence through skill development and achievement, and influence the next generation. Throughout the years, Dr. Bob has chaperoned, coached, and provided transportation for kid’s teams to area tournaments. He provides area kids with athletic camp scholarships and volunteers as referee at kid’s basketball game (even if he’s in surgical scrubs). Dr. Bob organized, sponsored, and chaperoned High School basketball and golf teams to travel to Wyoming, New York, Arkansas, Nebraska, Texas, New Mexico, and Nevada for practice, competition, and sightseeing.

Dr. Bob is fully integrated into the community and his leadership and knowledge is often sought by leaders within the community and beyond. Over the years, he has spoken to countless community groups on a variety of health and wellness topics, and has appeared in print and electronic media including WCCO Radio, KARE 11, USA Today, and Minnesota Basketball News. Dr. Bob is active in a wide range of community events, whether school sports, leadership in a local church, business organizations, civic groups, and local government – his contributions to the community beyond health care are phenomenal.

What impact have their efforts had on rural health?

The impact Dr. Bob has contributed to rural health in our community can be measured by the number of people who follow him, learn from his teachings, and share his values.

In 1978, only a year into his practice, Dr. Bob delivered a healthy baby girl; this baby girl would grow up to become Dr. Stacy Longnecker, the first female partner at OAHS. While not known at the time of her birth, Dr. Bob would become a central character in her life story, far beyond simply being her doctor. As a teenager, Stacy’s longtime friend succumbed to childhood cancer; it was this moment she began the idea of becoming a doctor to find a cure for cancer. Years later,

while in Medical School, Stacy's mother would also succumb to cancer, however, the experience Stacy shared with Dr. Bob while her mother was a patient at the Ortonville Hospital, took Stacy's medical career down a different path. While hospitalized, Stacy witnessed numerous conversations between her mother and Dr. Bob, conversations that Stacy calls "compassionately honest" conversations. Dr. Bob would ask questions like, "Is there anything you need to say or do in your life while still here on earth?" "Anyone you need to talk to that isn't here?" "What has been left undone?" He had these tough conversations that no one wanted to discuss, but knew they needed to be spoken. Stacy recalls that she never witnessed or experienced these conversations during her medical education; it was then when Stacy realized this is something she could do. She wanted to be like Dr. Bob. Dr. Stacy joined the OAHS practice two years later with Dr. Bob as her mentor and friend. If asked, Dr. Stacy will attribute her skills of compassion as a product of Dr. Bob's teaching and guidance.

In 2018, William Hoffman, a Georgetown University Medical Student, upon completion of his Family Medicine rotation with Dr. Bob, published an article regarding his time spent in rural Minnesota next to Dr. Bob. With a focus in neurology, Dr. Hoffman took special interest when a town socialite presented to the emergency department with weakness in her hand and slurred speech. Morning hospital rounds revealed this patient threw another clot that profoundly infarcted her brain and left her with a severe aphasia. Following consultation with telemedicine neurology, the patient was discharged home to hospice. Even though having cared for her since 1977, the relationship between this patient and Dr. Bob began long before that; they were neighbors. Dr. Hoffman commented "the narrative between the patient and Dr. Bob was similar for many in this community: Dr. Bob cared for most people in town and delivered their kids and grandkids." After her first week of hospice, the patient's family called and asked if Dr. Bob would see her at home; no stranger to home visits, Dr. Bob warmly agreed. Dr. Hoffman writes that "while a large medical center may have offered state-of-the-art technology and interventions, the patient was better off in her rural community...that had a well-supported hospital and family physicians who spent their careers in the community. The patient did not want her final days to involve an emergency room, an internist, or palliative specialist. She wanted Dr. Bob to care for her until her death. Perhaps the focus on pushing medicine's boundaries has made it easy to overlook the urgent necessity to understand one's values in order to care for them. In a time when rural hospitals are closing, it should be considered what may be lost within larger institutions."

Dr. Bob is a stabilizing force for patients, fellow providers, staff, and the community. Whether he's purchasing scrubs for the EVS staff person not able to afford them or holding the hand of fellow partner as he explains her husband unexpectedly died, Dr. Bob is the steadfast within OAHS and the community. He could have succeeded personally and professionally anywhere he chose to go, but he chose to dedicate his life to serving a rural Minnesota community. Dr. Bob is the common man that left Ortonville to pursue an education, yet he is uncommonly dedicated to his patients, his community, and his family.

Is there anything else you'd like to share about the nominee that would help us appreciate their contributions to rural health?

When Dr. Bob and his wife Mary talk about retirement he will often ask, "What can I possibly do that would be more purposeful than my current life?" It is a fair question. Many of his patients tell Mary they love him and don't want him to retire, but there is mutuality in these relationships. Dr. Bob also loves his patients, the people he works alongside, his partners, and the work.

One of Dr. Bob's sons recently remarked, "Dad has impacted healthcare in Ortonville because no one can achieve buy-in like he does. He's not a fast talker, and he doesn't try to manipulate people. He walks the walk and people sense that. Compassion is key; it can't be faked and it can't be missed. Who doesn't want to follow someone who is doing right, and for the right reasons? When he's needed help, people line up because they know the need is genuine and he's already done his part."

Former student and future partner, Dr. David Collins shares: "Nominating Dr. Bob for the Minnesota Rural Health Lifetime Achievement Award requires no thought, him winning the award is formality. He lives, breathes, and doctors Ortonville. Dr. Bob is a man who has poured everything he has into the Ortonville community, striving to make it better in any way possible. However, his passion does not stop with the town or facility itself. The passion spreads to his fellow partners, the nursing staff, support staff, medical students. I consider myself a better physician, but more importantly a

better person because of my interactions with him. Because of his leadership and mentor ship, I can safely say I look forward to making an impact on rural health myself. I will consider it a victory if I can do a fraction of the incredible things Dr. Bob has been able to accomplish in his long career."

Friend and former partner, Dr. Mark Huntington shares: "After eight incredible years working with Dr. Bob and our other partners, I left our practice in Ortonville to join the faculty of an institution whose goal is the training of rural family physicians for our region. As I instruct and mentor the young doctors, in my mind the goal I have for them is to be the kind of doctor that Dr. Bob Ross is; if they attain even half of his stature, they will be amazing physicians."

Dr. Bob's wife, Mary shares: "As a husband he has always encouraged me to pursue my own interests, has fended for himself when work interfered with family events, vacations, or travel, but was fully present when circumstances allowed. He was the kind of dad who drove the car into the backyard so the headlights would extend the neighbor kids fun playing football long into the evening, was at all parent teacher conferences, all of our sons' sporting events and concerts. "I never once thought dad's work interfered with him prioritizing us kids." We recognized he had made a commitment to come back to his home town, and did so with limited resources, and his loyalty never wavered. We always knew he also worked hard for our benefit as a family."