



Armstrong takes helm of hospital

Jeremy Armstrong, a Kansas native, is the new administrator for Allen County Regional and Anderson County hospitals. He's been introducing himself first to hospital staff and plans to take time getting to know the Iola and Garnett communities.



By VICKIE MOSS

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Jeremy Armstrong is the new administrator for Allen County Regional and Anderson County hospitals on behalf of the Saint Luke's Health System.

Photo by Vickie Moss / Iola Register



Jeremy Armstrong, the new administrator for Allen County Regional and Anderson County hospitals, is no stranger to small towns.

He grew up in Wetmore, a town of about 300 north of Topeka, and served as the leader of small-town hospitals in Marion and Beloit.

He knows that it takes time to get to know a community. He took over the hospitals in Iola and Garnett on Sept. 19, and has spent the past month getting to know the staff and physicians in each town.

"Then I'll make my way through the community," he said. "Each community is a little unique in their culture and what makes them tick."



That slow and steady approach also applies in finding a more permanent place to live. He's currently renting in Iola as he and his wife search for a house. His wife is currently in Beloit with their youngest daughter, a high school senior there who is active in sports such as cross country and plays first-chair violin in the orchestra, and didn't want to be uprooted at a critical point in her high school career.

"She was really pulling on dad's heartstrings," Armstrong said. "She didn't want to move. I understand."

His wife of 25 years, Tammy, agreed to stay in Beloit with her until graduation. Not only does it help their daughter, it will give them more time to get to know the communities and find just the right house.

One thing in particular caught their attention: the Bowler Fine Arts Center. They're looking forward to seeing shows, particularly musicians and orchestral performances.

"Music is very much a part of our family," Armstrong said.

Both of his parents were music teachers, and Armstrong played trumpet and sang in the choir even through college at Baker University in Baldwin City. His wife has a bachelor's degree in music education and nearly completed a master's in music therapy.

"I've since retired that part of my life. My wife and kids handle the music now," he said.

The family has been active in church and clubs in their



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communities, Armstrong previously joined rotary clubs and other organizations.

Their two oldest children both attended Kansas State University, and their youngest also plans to be a Wildcat.

"The ironic thing is I have two degrees from KU," Armstrong said.

ARMSTRONG earned his first degree in biology from Baker.

During his senior year, he developed an interest in microscopic work and decided to go to the University of Kansas to earn a degree in cytotechnology. That's the study of cells to detect abnormalities such as cancer.

Armstrong worked as a cytotechnologist for eight years at the Truman Medical Center (now University Health), where he also helped teach.

"I enjoyed my work but I realized my true passion was on the business side of things," he said.

He then pursued a master's degree from KU in health services administration in 2003, and moved to South Dakota for an administrative fellowship program. The health system there is much like the Saint Luke's Health System that manages both Allen and Anderson County's hospitals.

"It gave me broad exposure to the different ways healthcare can be delivered," he said.

After working for a critical access hospital in South Dakota for two years, Armstrong decided it was time to return to Kansas. His parents still live in Wetmore, which would later help in his recent decision to move to this area.

He spent eight years working at the hospital in Marion, and another eight years at the hospital in Beloit. (Yes, he admits eight years seems to be a pattern.) Both are independent, county-owned hospitals such as ACRH had been before it was leased to Saint Luke's in July 2020.

"The thing that drew me to this position and Saint Luke's in general is their vision for the system: 'The best place to get care. The best place to give care.' When you're trying to provide leadership, that boils it down into two very special sentences," he said.

ARMSTRONG sees the potential for improvement at ACRH and ACH.

First and foremost, he said, it's important to remember that hospitals provide a service.

"We're here to serve the community. If we're not meeting the healthcare needs of our community, we need to start there and work from there," he said.

Saint Luke's has made several recent changes that Armstrong sees as steps in the right direction.

First is a conversion to the Epic electronic health records system that will allow Iowa's hospital to better communicate with others in the Saint Luke's system, and give patients a more interactive way to review their health information and participate in their care.

"Epic is a huge effort to streamline what can be a frustrating process. Our patients expect us to get that information right," he said.

Saint Luke's and the county also undertook two major remodel projects that opened this month. First was renovating the former labor and delivery unit into a specialty clinic in order to expand services from visiting physicians. The other was a remodel of the Medical Arts Building at 826 E. Madison St.; the hospital's health clinic moved there and added a second primary care physician.

"There are new and exciting things happening here that don't happen at every facility," Armstrong said.

ACRH also added a program to provide a hospitalist, which is a physician who specializes in treating patients at the hospital itself, and brought in a group dedicated to emergency medicine to oversee the emergency department.

Armstrong believes there may be more opportunities to improve services, perhaps "things we haven't even discovered yet.

"In smaller, rural hospitals you can't necessarily come in with a cookie-cutter approach. We're each unique."

SPLITTING his time between two hospitals in two communities

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is new for Armstrong.

He typically spends two days a week at each facility, and alternates Fridays.

He sees an opportunity to standardize procedures, especially now that both facilities are using the Epic system. Until now, the hospitals shared some administrative positions but that wasn't an option for other employees such as nurses, because they weren't trained or using the same electronic records system.

"It's good that we can occasionally share staff back and forth. We aren't immune to the staffing challenges you see across the nation," Armstrong said.

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