

The doctor is in

Empey will be the first Tribal member pediatrician working in Grand Ronde

By Danielle Frost

Smoke Signals staff writer

When Allison Empey starts as a pediatrician at the Health & Wellness Center in August, she will be the first Tribal member to serve in that role.

However, she is not the first Tribal member to become a pediatrician. That distinction goes to her older sister, 37-year-old Erica Empey Benthin, who works for Kaiser Permanente.

“Erica was a big source of inspiration to me,” Empey, 35, says. “I always knew if I went back to school, it would be in pediatrics because I have always enjoyed working with kids and families.”

The two sisters grew up in McMinnville. Their Grand Ronde ancestry comes through mother Joann Empey and grandmother Hattie Riggs.

When Empey became interested in medical school, she went to her sister for more information, although Benthin kept the details of how grueling a medical residency program could be from her younger sister.

“She didn’t tell me how hard it was because she didn’t want to scare me,” Empey says with a smile.

Benthin had been interested in being a doctor for most of her life, but for Empey that desire came midway through her senior year at Stanford.

“I realized what a cool career it could be, but at that point I was too far along to change tracks,” she says.

After earning her bachelor’s degree in 2006, Empey worked for a year doing consulting to try and use



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

Tribal member and pediatrician Allison Empey will be seeing patients two days every other week at the Grand Ronde Health & Wellness Clinic starting in August.

her degree.

But medicine kept calling and Empey was accepted into Georgetown University, where she fulfilled the pre-med requirements.

She attended medical school at University of California San Francisco from 2009 to 2013, and a residency program at Oregon Health & Science University from 2013 to 2016.

“Medical school was challenging, but I would say residency is harder. ... It is a different kind of challenge,” Empey says.

After her pediatrics residency program was complete, Empey applied for and was accepted to serve an additional year as a chief resident.

“You are in charge of a lot of education for residents,” she says. “You serve as a liaison between them and the faculty. ... I love teaching and I like mentorship, and thought that would be a neat way to do it.”

Currently, Empey works in the academic pediatrics field, which is when a doctor works at a university and has interests in scholarly work such as research, advocacy and medical education in addition to working with residents who treat patients.

She also works with outpatients as well as patients in the OHSU newborn nursery.

After joining the Grand Ronde Health Committee in 2017, Empey met Health Services Executive Director Kelly Rowe, who mentioned the Tribe was looking for a pediatrician.

“I was just finishing up my chief year and wanted more experience first, but we kept in touch with each other,” Empey says. “My department has been really supportive of it as well.”

Empey, who lives in Portland, will be in Grand Ronde two days every other week.

“I am excited because it will be an opportunity to give back to my Tribe,” she says. “Everyone has been so supportive of me through the years.”

Benthin, who has two toddlers, recently attended a Mother’s Day Tea with Empey when she learned that her position in Grand Ronde would be announced at the event.

“I am just so proud of her,” she says. “I love my job and love being

a physician, and I know she does, too. It is such a good career. I am really impressed with what she has done so far and how she was able to work it out to come here and work at OHSU.”

Benthin says that when Empey was a resident, she started the “Reach Out and Read,” program at the clinic, where doctors give patients newborn to age 5 a book at the conclusion of their medical appointments.

“She went over and beyond and found books specifically for Native children,” Benthin says. “I was really happy to see her do that.”

Rowe says she is pleased to have Empey on board.

“It is an absolute honor and privilege to have Allison join the clinic,” she says. “To know that a Grand Ronde Tribal member is providing care to our kids and is a part of making our Tribe healthy and strong is powerful.”

Empey says she is hoping to see her patients out and about in Grand Ronde, something that she doesn’t currently experience working in a large city.

“I am excited to be a part of the community,” she says.

Empey says that working for the Tribe will give her the opportunity to blend her two passions of Native American health and medicine.

In addition to her work on the Grand Ronde Health Committee, Empey also serves on the American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Native American Child Health. The group visits different Indian Health Service locations and also advocates in Congress.

“Our patients can’t vote, but are some of the most vulnerable population,” she says. “They need a voice.”

Her advice for other Tribal members who are considering becoming doctors, but are not sure if they can do it, is to try.

“They are smart enough and good enough,” Empey says. “Many people before them have created a path for them to follow and they have the support of their Tribe.” ■

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