

KP Institution and Leader of the Band, Dr. William Roes Retires, Sort Of

Dr. Roes has been keeping the peninsula alive and humming over four decades.

KRISA BRUEMMER, KP NEWS

After over 40 years practicing medicine on the Key Peninsula, Dr. William Roes is entering a phase of semi-retirement.

Starting Dec. 30, Roes will cut back to approximately two days a week for home visits to patients qualifying through Medicare, special projects, filling in at the Community Health Care (CHC) clinic in Key Center and seeing patients at the future Mustard Seed Project homes.

"I'm not really retiring," he said. "I'm just getting out of the way and letting somebody else have all the fun that I've had. I envision this could go on for a few more years."

In December 2020, Roes sold the solo private practice he'd operated since 1993 to CHC, a network of clinics based in Pierce County (See "Key Medical Center Plans for New Owner," KP News, Dec. 2020).

Roes grew up on a ranch "25 miles out of town" in Wyoming, earned a bachelor's degree in sociology from the University of Washington, then attended medical school at the University of Nevada College of Medical Sciences and Washington University in St. Louis. He first came to the KP in 1977 as a resident in training from Tacoma Family Medicine.

"It was kind of a circuitous route to get here," Roes said. "It's just where I was meant to be, I think."

Roes had wanted to be a teacher but the summer before his final year at UW he decided to cram his schedule with

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pre-med classes. After graduation, he walked around Capitol Hill saying, "I want a job in a hospital," until Virginia Mason hired him as a surgical orderly. The next day, Roes was in an operating room with a patient having gallbladder surgery.

"It was total immersion," Roes said. "It was a fascinating, wonderful job and I learned so much."

After a year at Virginia Mason, Roes was

invited to interview for the University of Nevada's new two-year medical program. Nevada had an arrangement with Wyoming, where there were no medical schools.

"I thought, I'm going to make a name for myself," Roes said. "They'd never taken anybody from Wyoming and there weren't a whole lot of people applying from Wyoming, so I went down there wearing my cowboy hat and my cowboy boots (and) a suede jacket."

After Nevada, Roes completed medical school in Missouri where he worked at student-staffed St. Louis City Hospital No. 1. He later worked at the KP clinic

throughout his residency at Tacoma Family Medicine, then joined the practice while continuing obstetrics and delivery at Tacoma General and St. Joseph Medical Center.

"It was a wonderful way to build a practice as a young doctor because you've got the mom, you've got the baby, and you've got the kids and ultimately you've got the dad and then you've got the cousins and the neighbors — so it grew quickly," he said. "And then we just kind of grew old together."

Roes delivered over 360 babies and took photos of each one. "I've always enjoyed pulling those pictures out when they come in with their (own) kids."

Roes said his absolute least favorite thing is when someone comes in saying they feel like someone is sitting on their chest. "We've had two or three people with cardiac arrests in the office," he said. One patient returned years later, thanking

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them for saving his life. Others died. "If you've got chest pain, call 911. Don't drive yourself to the office," he said.

The pandemic has been exceptionally difficult for his clinic. "As a business it was a challenge. For us to try to find ways to care for people," he said. "Also, what it's done to seniors, that's been heartbreaking."

Early in the pandemic, Roes went into a 102-year-old patient's home to administer a COVID-19 test wearing a Tyvek painter's suit and mask from Harbor Freight tool supply. Since then, several of his patients have died from COVID-19. His staff members who chose not to be vaccinated lost their jobs. "It's become very political and I hate that," Roes said.

In his semi-retirement, Roes hopes to return to his longstanding passion for

medical mission work in Honduras. Clinic of Angels is in a small village where "there's a fair number of congenital defects and one of them is kids with six fingers ... It's very bad culturally; people look at it like that baby's cursed," Roes said.

"I've done some surgical things down there that I'd never do up here because

there's always somebody that's got a lot more training, more skills. But if you're the only one there, people are looking at you like, 'You're my chance.'"

Roes also looks forward to spending more time working on his classic cars, a 1968 Mustang and '60 Ranchero, playing trombone, tuba, trumpet — "whatever the band needs" — with the Down Home Band, and writing. His KP News column "To Your Health" ran for 20 years.

"There's just a ton of things that I coulda, shoulda, woulda," he said. "I haven't been fishing for 100 years. I used to like to fish."

Despite his primary residence being across the Tacoma Narrows Bridge, Roes plans to stay connected to the KP.

"It's just fun. There are so many wonderful people here," he said. "I've reserved a spot at the Mustard Seed — one of the rooms — but I don't need it quite yet." ■



Lisa Bryan, KP News