

**Grow Your Own  
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Centennial Area Health Education Center (CAHEC)  
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How can you tell if you live in a rural area? During zucchini season you lock your car when you park downtown so as not to risk coming back to find the vehicle filled with a neighbor's surplus squash.

I grew up in a part of Chicago where the closest thing to a garden was the tub on the roof of my apartment building's garage in which the German landlady grew basil to use in the pesto sauce she made to please her Italian mother-in-law.

I've learned a few things about rural life (besides the proliferative powers of zucchini) since I set out from the city in 1975 with a newly minted medical license. For one, rural neighbors are generous with a lot more than fresh vegetables: with their time, labor, advice and meals, to name a few. Whether I needed them or not, all I'd have to do when I lived in Yuma, CO (pop. about 2000) was to open the hood of my car on the street in front of my house and I'd have more advice, helping hands and loaned tools than I could use.

People watch out for each other in a small town. They also watch each other. I never quite got used to all the heads on the right side of the room turning to the left and all those on the left side turning to the right to follow me as I walked down the center aisle to take a seat at the back of the cafe. The gazes were that much more intense if I was accompanied by a friend who was visiting from out-of-town. Having

developed my sensitivities in the city, it took a while to understand that what I experienced in public was curiosity and friendliness, not mistrust or hostility.

Before long I was subtly lifting my right index finger off the steering wheel to greet vehicles (usually pickups) I passed on the highway. I never did, however, become enough of a country dude that I could actually identify people by what they drove.

All these observations have this in common. Country people know each other well and they care about and for each other. That's the greatest joy of rural life, especially for a health care professional. If you work hard, the rewards that come from the close relationships you develop with patients and their families are enormous.

The hard part, I found, was how to stop being a doctor (for example, upon encountering a patient with a question about her bill in the midst of a half-asleep, late-night run to 7-Eleven for a carton of milk).

That's the main reason why the bulk of people who practice all sorts of health careers in small towns grew up in the country. They understand and appreciate all this stuff. They know from the start how to deal with it.

Centennial Area Health Education Center puts a great deal of energy and resources into programs that teach kids in the small towns of our ten county Northeast Colorado region about health careers, starting as early as grammar school. We know that the best strategy for cultivating the rural healthcare workforce is to grow your own. Though it's not as easy as growing zucchini, maybe one of these days we'll actually produce a surplus. Can you imagine finding an extra

dentist or nurse upon returning to your car parked on Main Street? At CAHEC we can.