



# A *Community* Pillar

**Civic duty combined  
with pharmacy passion**

by Chris Linville

Independent community pharmacists are often considered pillars of their communities, and that's certainly true for Kirk Heinz. Along with owning and operating three pharmacies, he has also found time to be president of the Washington State Pharmacy Association. Oh, and by the way, he's also served on the city council and as mayor of his hometown of Eatonville, Wash. He is a member of the local school board and served as president of that organization. Additionally, he has offered his time in multiple service functions with the Eatonville Lions Club.



"I've always been a giver," Heinz says. "It's just something for which I have a passion. I enjoy supporting my community, and believe if you support them they will support you."

Owning his own pharmacy was also a passion for Heinz. "From the first day of pharmacy school, my plan was to own an independent pharmacy in a small town," he says.

That plan became a reality in 1995 when Heinz, a 1986 Washington State University pharmacy graduate, opened

Kirk's Pharmacy in Eatonville, a town of 2,865 residents about an hour south of Seattle. In 2004 Heinz opened Kirk's Pharmacy at Sunrise, 30 miles north of Eatonville in the Sunrise Medical Complex in Puyallup. In 2009 Heinz opened his third location, Kirk's Pharmacy in Hartland, also in the Puyallup area. The Eatonville store is 4,000 square feet and what Heinz describes as "your typical small-town pharmacy" with 13 employees and about 260 prescriptions dispensed daily. The two other stores are both about 1,500 square feet and situated within or next to medical clinics. They each dispense about 160 prescriptions daily. All three pharmacies have compounding labs. Other services provided include vaccinations, medication synchronization and adherence strip packaging, diabetic shoes, medication therapy management, mail service, and some delivery.

Heinz says his guiding principles are "to provide the highest level of pharmacy service to our patients, the providers and caregivers in our community, and to meet the unique needs of the individual through innovative practice, clinical excellence, professional leadership, quality commitment, and superior service."

#### **ON THE PATH TO OWNERSHIP**

Heinz was born in Morehead, Minn., but grew up in North Dakota and Washington state, spending summers working on his grandparents' farm in Enderlin, N.D. In high school his primary interest was woodworking as opposed to science. That changed during his second year at Green River (Washington) Community College.

"My organic chemistry professor was a retired pharmacist who went back to teach," Heinz says. "He thought my personality and willingness to help other students were traits of a pharmacist and recommended I apply to pharmacy school."

In 1986, fresh out of pharmacy school, Heinz interviewed for a job at the pharmacy he would one day own, and was hired as pharmacy manager. "That might have been because I was the cheapest guy available," he jokes. But that set him on his path.

#### **COMPREHENSIVE CARE**

Heinz says a priority is to provide patients with a full-scale menu of products and services.

"With a combination of medication synchronization, vaccinations, and compounding, our desire is to provide comprehensive care for each and every patient to meet their unique needs," he says. "Providing personalized care is what we believe sets us apart from everyone else; our patients are not just a number to us."



**Kirk Heinz has owned Kirk's Pharmacy since 1995.**

Heinz says the pharmacies have been doing compounding for many years. "We joined PCCA in the early 1990s, which has helped us grow our business," he says.

The pharmacy's strip packaging machine has been a boost for adherence, Heinz says.

"We're excited about that," he says. "We are using it to help our patients stay compliant with their medications. It is so exciting for me when my patients come in and tell me how much better they feel because they are taking their medications the way they are supposed to taking them."

### **TECH INVESTMENTS**

Technology investments have helped improve productivity and efficiency. Several years ago Heinz purchased a robot and has upgraded its pharmacy software to enhance workflow. It also has an IVR and its app allows patients to call and send their refill requests and messages directly to the pharmacy.

"It has simplified our workflow," Heinz says. "We use all of these technologies to allow us the time for the most important thing in our business, which is our patients."

When asked to quantify return on investment, Heinz says

that paying the bills, covering wages, and having a bit left over is important, but not the primary measurement.

"The ability to take care of my patients" is the top priority, he says. "The most satisfying thing for me is when a patient comes in and thanks you for your advice and recommendations that helped them with their problem or ailments."

And when his patients are healthy, Heinz wants to do all he can to keep them that way.

"I want to teach them how to be more accountable for their health," he says. "That includes providing information when asked and needed. It's all about empowering the patient with the knowledge and tools needed to consistently make smart choices to improve their health and quality of life."

### **FACING CHALLENGES**

When asked what the biggest challenge he faces is, Heinz says what many of his colleagues already know: "Reimbursement for the medications we dispense. With more and more claims being paid below cost, it makes it hard to have the staff needed to provide the time to expand into more patient care areas. We are working as efficiently as possible and still have a hard time," he says.

Heinz also says that community pharmacists might be too modest, and probably need to toot their horn a bit louder.

"Educating patients and providers about all of the great services we offer has always been a struggle for us," he says. "I have noticed this throughout the years with all of my interactions with pharmacists and owners across the country. As independents we are great at what we do, but we are not so great at marketing that greatness."

But looking ahead, he thinks that might start changing. Heinz says he sees the pharmacist's role evolving in a move to more direct care. In part due to advocacy by WSPA, in 2015 legislation was passed by the Washington State Legislature making Washington the first state in the country to require that pharmacists be included in health insurance provider networks.

"In Washington State we continue to expand the role of pharmacists, increasing our presence and influence as part of the health care team," Heinz says. "Patients will continue to look to their pharmacist as their first point of contact for health care, and we will now be able to provide that effectively, as a more direct part of the health care team. We need to be ready." ■

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