

The Post and Courier

Rooting in a small town

Student loan forgiveness program helps bring dentistry to rural communities

By [Diane Knich](#)

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ST. STEPHEN -- William Barnette worried he would have to leave this rural community for dental care when the dentist he had seen for decades passed away.

At 84, the last thing Barnette needed was another long drive to the Charleston area for a health care appointment.

But Dr. Tristan Cordray, 28, purchased Dr. Herbert Orvin's St. Stephen Family Dentistry practice soon after he graduated from dental school in 2007, and began seeing patients in the tight-knit community.



Photo by Alan Hawes

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Dr. Tristan Cordray works on patient William Barnette at his office in St. Stephen. 'He's the best dentist in town,' Barnette joked. Cordray is no stranger to rural life, having grown up on a farm in Ravenel.



Photo by Alan Hawes

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Dr. Tristan Cordray makes notes on a patient's medical records Thursday at his office in St. Stephen.

"We were very, very fortunate to get this young fella here," Barnette said at his dental appointment last week. "He looks out for me."

Dr. Jack Sanders, dean of the Medical University of South Carolina's College of Dental Medicine, said Cordray made an unusual choice when he set up shop in a rural community. He's one of 20 dentists participating in a state student loan forgiveness program for those willing to practice in rural areas. The dentists receive \$75,000 over four years to apply toward their student loan debt.

The state Legislature has supported the program with \$250,000 or more each year since 2005, Sanders said. He expects to add three or four dentists this year.

Most young dentists practice in urban areas, Sanders said, where they can make more money. The average graduate leaves dental school with \$250,000 in student loan debt, so few dentists think they can afford to practice in rural areas, which generally have a higher concentration of low-income patients, he said.

But many rural residents lack access to dental care, he said. Turning that around is important because dental problems are one of the main reasons children miss school and one of the leading causes of non-trauma visits to emergency rooms.

"What we're hoping for is that dentists will move into low-income communities and stay there," Sanders said.

The folks at the St. Stephen Historical and Cultural Affairs Society's monthly community cafe lunch last week said they are hoping Cordray stays in the community a long time. Volunteer Olene Jernigan said, "We love him. We need him. But we don't want to get his head too big."

Cordray grew up on a farm in Ravenel, so he's no stranger to the rural way of life. He now lives in West Ashley and commutes to work each day. He said he and his wife, Callie, a physical therapist in Moncks Corner, will probably move to St. Stephen one day. For now, they're taking the transition a step at a time.

Linda Gregg has worked as the dental practice's front office manager for about 25 years. She wasn't sure she would stay after Orvin died if the new dentist wasn't willing to take time and genuinely care for the patients, she said.

"We know them. We know their families. They were our grade school teachers, and they're the people we go to church with," she said.

But Cordray's style is a lot like Orvin's style, she said. "It's hard to have a strict production schedule with rural people," she said.

Hygienists Ashley Branch and Brittany Humbert and dental assistants Donna Powell and Martika Callison also work in practice, which functions like a family.

Cordray said he's made a commitment to the practice and is settling in.

The student loan forgiveness money is helping out a lot. He borrowed about \$150,000 to pay for dental school. He was able to cover some of the cost with money he earned working at his family's venison processing company in Ravenel. And then he had to borrow even more money to buy the practice, he said. "I'm locked in for a good little while."

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