

Kirk Bernadino, MD

What is the common thread that runs through a person's hobbies, fatherhood and the practice of medicine?

For Kirk Bernadino, MD, the answer lies in creativity. Dr. Bernadino joined Pen Bay Medical Center in 2018 as director of endoscopy. As a gastroenterologist, he focuses on such conditions as irritable bowel syndrome, hemorrhoids, anal fissures, perianal abscesses, anal fistulas, perianal infections, diverticular diseases, colitis, colon polyps and cancer.

After receiving his medical degree from the University of Vermont College of Medicine in 1998, Dr. Bernadino served his residency at Maine Medical Center. From 2006 to 2018 he practiced gastroenterology at Essentia Health in Duluth, Minn. He served as chief of gastroenterology at Essentia Health before returning to Maine in 2018.

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How did you decide to go to medical school?

I was a retail pharmacist for several years and found that it was not as stimulating as I hoped. This was before retail pharmacy became interactive with an emphasis on counseling patients. I started thinking about culinary school, a furniture-making apprenticeship and medical school. I was in my mid-20s and thought I wanted a career that allowed creativity. There are trends in both food and furniture making. It's the rare person who can step aside from those trends and be truly unique. Although I sought creativity and uniqueness, it was intimidating to imagine a career that I thought demanded them. In medicine there is truth. I can learn it and I can practice it. There's a structure and a process to medical training that I thought left little room for variation or expression.



Do you find room for creativity in medicine?

Unexpectedly, I did. The creativity I found in medicine is in how I interact with patients. I try to understand their relationship with disease. That often helps me learn how well they cope, whether they are satisfied with how well their disease is controlled, or if they are in need of something more to meet their treatment expectations.

Looking back, is there a moment that affirms your decision to practice medicine?

Much of my career has been dedicated to procedures that evaluate potential cancers. So not infrequently, I am responsible for delivering a cancer diagnosis. It's always daunting, but I work hard at helping patients and their families understand the diagnosis. It's a life altering moment to hear that you

have cancer but, in the same breath, many people ask, 'What does it mean?' Helping patients understand what it means and what to expect is the place where I think I have made the most difference in people's lives.

You've had some interesting hobbies over the years: hiking many of the 4,000-foot mountains throughout New England, piloting hot air balloons, restoring old Land Rovers, collecting lighting fixtures from old Pullman rail cars.

What are your passions these days?

Right now, I'm primarily a dad. I have two young boys who I recently brought half way across the country to Maine. So I've let go of a lot of hobbies to take on the ultimate responsibility of raising children. But I haven't relinquished all of my hobbies. Now I embrace my children's interests. For examples, one of my sons is teaching me to sail and I am learning to play ukulele along with them.

You've spoken about creativity. How creative is it being the father of two?

I think creativity in fatherhood has a lot to do with recreating yourself and creating the image your children will hold of you. But there are norms and structure to follow, like trying to raise them in a religious faith or teach them socially acceptable behaviors. There's not a lot of creativity in what you teach them but there's a lot of creativity in how you deliver it. I've learned approaches that work for one of my sons doesn't necessarily work for the other.

Why practice in Maine?

In terms of practicing medicine, the idea of following in the footsteps of Dr. Neil Smith (*Editor's Note: Dr. Smith retired in 2016 after practicing for more than 20 years*) and carrying on his dream of providing high quality, state-of-the-art gastrointestinal care to this community was very appealing. Dr. Smith pioneered gastroenterology in our community. His superb clinical skills and ever-present grace and compassion are very big shoes to fill.