

Why I Live Here

Dr. Christopher Rheams, hospitalist at Weatherford Regional Medical Center

Good medicine

A disillusioned doctor from Louisiana finds renewed passion for his work (along with a great guitar shop)

F *By Tiffany Figueiredo*

or Dr. Christopher Rheams, the troubles of the country's headline-making healthcare industry hit close to home, prompting a move from a lucrative private practice in Shreveport to a new way of practicing medicine in Weatherford.

Rheams, a 54-year-old New Orleans native who specializes in internal medicine, spent 21 years as a primary care doctor in Shreveport treating some 5,000 patients for everything from simple colds to terminal illnesses. He developed a special interest in treating HIV patients at a time when very few doctors in southern Louisiana would.

"In the mid-'80s, when HIV was recognized as an epidemic and poorly understood, there was a lot of fear in the medical community — fear of the unknown and certainly a great amount of homophobia," he says. "I thought back to the story of Jesus healing the lepers and about all the doctors throughout history who were courageous enough to step forward during the plagues, and knew I was needed."

As one of the few physicians willing to treat these patients, Rheams became an HIV specialist, meeting gay community leaders and becoming an advocate for better treatment and understanding.

"There was a lot of prejudice and it was definitely an emotional commitment, because at the time, all of these patients were terminal," he says. "But even I, as a straight male, could see that there was something special about these people. They were so young and vital and creative; trying to help them through this terrible ordeal was very rewarding."

What wasn't rewarding for Rheams was the healthcare bureaucracy. Disillusioned over what he calls "the toxic medical climate in Shreveport," Rheams moved to Aledo five years ago and took a position as a hospitalist, treating inpatients at Weatherford Regional Medical Center.



Photo by Ralph Lauer

"My wife, Amy, and I had visited friends in the area and just got a good feeling about the place," he says. "We love the spirit of it, the enthusiasm. And since the hospital serves a rural population and treats everyone, irrespective of their ability to pay, I felt like I could get back to actually taking care of people. We see it all, and the level of illness is more than I expected. It's challenging but totally liberating."

To center himself after long days at the hospital, Rheams and his wife head to Bikram Yoga on Foch Street in Fort Worth at least four days a week. He credits yoga practice, along with prayer and meditation, with working the kinks out of both his mind and his body. The couple also make weekly "date night" trips to Sushi Axiom, Borders bookstore and Central Market. "A grocery store where you can't find a parking place on a Saturday night is a beautiful thing," he says.

Rheams also blows off steam with loud music, courtesy of his collection of some 40 to 50 guitars and 20 amplifiers. His favorites in his extensive collection are a Gibson J-45 acoustic that he says he "just bonded with," and an off-the-shelf electric Stratocaster that his wife purchased for him. He also has a near-encyclopedic knowledge of the old bluesmen and can play every song Muddy Waters ever wrote.

"One of my favorite places to go is Craig's Music in Weatherford," he says. "I knew I'd found a great place to hang out when I went in to trade in a guitar that I was having trouble playing. A big guy in a cowboy hat and mustache said, 'Son, I can't let you do that. This thing is a tone monster. Just go home and play the thing.' So I did, and it ended up being one of my favorite guitars. When we discovered that place, Amy turned to me and said, 'OK, we can move here.'"