When new patients meet Dr. Dean Kaihoi (pronounced Ki-hi) for the first time, they are often a bit taken aback. Because of the spelling of his last name, most people expect the family practitioner to be, say, Hawaiian or Asian or perhaps African. But Kaihoi, who practices at the Park Nicollet Clinic in Eden Prairie, did not grow up in Honolulu, or anywhere else bordering the South Pacific. He is a native Minnesotan who grew up in Willmar and graduated from Willmar Community College (the precursor to Ridgewater College)—a fair-haired, bespectacled man of half-Norwegian and half-Danish extraction.

“I had a patient come in one time who was disappointed that I was not Chinese,” he recalls. “In 1903, my great-grandfather emigrated from Copenhagen, and changed the name from Andersen to Kaihoi. I guess both ‘Kai’ and ‘Hoi’ are somewhat common last names in Denmark. So he put them together into ‘Kaihoi.’”

While not exactly a common name in this country, there are quite a few Kaihois around Willmar, where Dean grew up, and they are all related to him in some way. And while Kaihoi himself has gone on to a stellar career since leaving the area—he’s been seeing patients in the same area for more than 20 years and was recently named one of the Twin Cities’ top doctors in a local poll—he hasn’t forgotten his roots. In fact, he says that, if anything, his early experiences and education proved to be some of the most powerful influences on his career.

New paths
After graduation from high school in 1974, Kaihoi felt most comfortable staying a while longer in Willmar, so he decided to enroll at an institution close to home. “Going to school in Willmar was a good thing for me,” he says. “This was my home town, and it was a great place for me to start my higher education. I think I paid somewhere around $900 for two full years of college back then. I know tuition has certainly gone up since those days, but it is still an excellent value.”

As often happens, however, higher education led Kaihoi down some unanticipated paths. “I started out as a business major—my dad was in the insurance industry—but to be honest, I don’t think I ever took a business class,” he says. “Instead, I wound up taking a lot of math. There was a teacher there named Dick Dalluge from whom I took calculus for two years. He became a friend and was a great contact person.

“For a while, I thought I might go into math,” he adds. “But in my second year, I started taking chemistry. I became very interested in it and I decided go on and get a four-year degree in it.”

Before he left Willmar, however, Kaihoi made a mark on the college and took advantage of all of its opportunities. He earned a 4.0 grade point average, which he says might have been the first perfect grade point in the school’s history. He was also active in extracurricular activities, including baseball and football, and was an officer in the school’s student government. “I had good experiences there in a number of different ways,” he says. “All of those activities wound up helping on my resume. Plus, I got to know the staff and administration at the college. For me, attending a community college was a real confidence-booster because it allowed me to get my feet wet.
But, he adds, the trouble and time it takes is worth it. Family practice and its opportunities to regularly see and build solid relationships with a range of people—young, old, healthy, sick—is more fulfilling to him than the shorter interactions characteristic of medical specialists. And while the life of a doctor is never easy, he says he wouldn’t change the course of his life. “In Cambridge I once worked on a man who was brought in to the clinic in the back of a pickup truck,” he says. “His arm had been cut off in a farm accident. Bad car accidents and those types of things stay with you—it’s impossible to forget them. But there’s always good things to remember as well. There’s plenty of upbeat things that happen in medicine. For example, I recently examined a newborn. Everything’s fine with the baby. And, I’ve taken care of the parents’ previous four children. It’s these sorts of experiences that develop strong relationships with patients. That’s the fun part of medicine.”

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