The following is the sixth in a series of articles about the Rural Track at the University of Colorado Denver School of Medicine. For more information, see previous articles in the CAFP Magazine or at http://www.ucsc.edu/som/rural. Family Physicians interested in hosting a Rural Track student can contact program director Mark Deutchman, MD, at mark.deutchman@ucdenver.edu or 303-724-9725.

In addition to facts about biology and chemistry, one lesson second-year medical student Avery MacKenzie has learned is that living and practicing on Colorado’s Western Slope “would be pretty fun.” MacKenzie spent four weeks during the summer of 2009 living on an apple farm in Paonia, Colo., and studying under doctors at North Fork Family Medical Clinic. The experience was part of her studies in the Rural Track at the University of Colorado Denver School of Medicine.

MacKenzie said her hosts take pride in homegrown products. “They called me their homegrown doctor and that’s how they introduced me to everyone,” she said. “If I decide to go back to Paonia, I already have some patients lined up — six years in advance.”

In a presentation to other Rural Track students, MacKenzie described the North Fork Family Medical Clinic as a four-physician operation with locations in Paonia and Hotchkiss. The staff also includes six nurses or medical assistants, as well as office managers, receptionists, clerks and personnel who do billing and coding. The nearest hospital, which has a level-four trauma center, is 30 miles away in Delta and the nearest level-two trauma center is 90 miles away in Grand Junction.

In addition to working in the clinics, she spent time in the emergency room, made nursing center visits, accompanied a doctor to an obstetrical clinic and learned about a program designed to keep patients in their homes as long as possible.

“My practice enjoyed having Avery participate in the care that we provide,” stated Heidi Marlin, MD. The doctor added that the student’s enthusiasm “helped her take full advantage of her hands-on opportunities with us as a second-year medical student! It is key to provide mentoring experiences like this to help medical students solidify or choose to become future rural physicians.”

Dr. Marlin also stated, “I feel teaching helps me give back to the medical community that influenced me to be a rural Family Physician.”

In an area where the economy is based largely on agriculture and coal mining, MacKenzie said patients, like the general population, included some people who spend all their days underground and others who spend all their days outside. She saw several mining-related injuries and said 90 percent of the miners use tobacco. To better understand the professional hazards, she took a tour of a mine.

“We went down seven miles underground into the coal mine in a car,” she explained. “Now I know a lot more about heavy equipment and how things fall on you and how people get hurt.”

Other medical cases she reported ranged from depression, a staph infection, sports physicals and a problem pregnancy to injuries resulting from being run over by a truck and complications of morbid obesity.

“I also did my first-ever surgery, which was a partial toenail removal,” she told her fellow students. MacKenzie found the doctors were diligent about staying current on the latest research and recommendations for therapy. Other observations included the following:

- The doctors were not reluctant to call on specialists as needed.
- They performed a lot of procedures and provided urgent care.
- The call schedule “wasn’t too bad.”
- The hospitals and communities offer customized student loan repayments for those who commit to practicing there after medical school.
- Quitting medical school to become a coal miner would not be advisable.

Activities that MacKenzie enjoyed during her time in Paonia included fishing, mountain-climbing and camping, as well as going to a county fair and attending her first demolition derby. She liked living on the apple farm, partly because she was allowed to take raspberries, carrots, squash and other produce for her meals. “I think I spent $35 on food the whole time I was there,” she said.

“...I had a fantastic time in the summer preceptorship,” MacKenzie said, adding she was disappointed that she would have to leave Paonia and return to school. “But then I thought, but wait! I get to do this the rest of my life!”

Originally from the East Coast, MacKenzie graduated from Colorado College in Colorado Springs. “I fell in love with Colorado and plan on staying (forever)! I fell in love with Colorado and plan on staying (forever)!” she stated. After graduating, she worked as an emergency medical technician for the ambulance service in Paonia. Her hosts during her preceptorship were the parents of a good friend of hers.

Rural Track offers much to med students

The summer preceptorship was one reason Avery MacKenzie chose the Rural Track, but there are others as well. She stated, “I joined the Rural Track at C.U. because I am very interested in returning to practice in a small town. The rural track provides a lot of assistance with funding and placement in communities in need of physicians. They provide us with early experiences like this one to help keep us interested in rural primary care. And they give us extra training in areas like colonoscopy, suture technique with the knowledge that rural physicians often have a large scope of practice and that early exposure can be very helpful. Both mentors and students involved in the Rural Track are enthusiastic, motivated and passionate about improving rural health.”

Rural Track meetings are held regularly and MacKenzie stated, “It is a wonderful group to be a part of and I look forward to our meetings every other week.”