

“All forward!” I yelled fiercely from the back of the raft as we approached the first big wave in the Yellowstone River Canyon. As the front of the raft bowed down into the crest of the foaming 7’ whitewater wave I got chills down my spine—we hit the wave too high. The boat was stalled on top of the wave for a frozen split second before it sucked in the back tube and “dump-trucked” both of the families and their children into the raging water. My instincts took over, I pulled myself and seven of our nine passengers back in the boat before I had a chance to blink. Then one of the mothers cursed at me with a look of terror and grabbed me frantically by the arm—her two children were stuck in dangerous pockets of water downstream. I maneuvered the raft to the bank while pointing for the children to swim to shore. Everyone survived, the mother apologized, and told me she could not believe how calm and collected I was. All in all, they had the time of their lives.

During the summer I spent as raft guide in Yellowstone National Park I was a professional chameleon. A few of the roles I played were that of the entertainer, safety guru, custodian and an unquestionable source of animal, park and water trivia. One guide said, “We take untrusting and total strangers and, hopefully, turn them into a wave devouring viking war ship in just under an hour.” This concoction of roles is similar to my job description of a family medicine doctor. In a short office visit you have to gain a patient’s trust, sympathize, apply medical knowledge and motivate compliance, not to mention deal with their insurance company. I will have to sympathize with situations I have not experienced for myself, such as the mother on the raft and the bond she shares with her children.

My grandfather, as a family medicine doctor in Jefferson, Ohio, taught me how to deeply connect with patients. For example, during a second trip to Yellowstone, I took my fiancé to the Mammoth Clinic; she had developed acute mountain sickness. When I handed the nurse my check for the visit she looked up and asked, “Are you Dr. Franley’s grandson? He delivered me as a baby.” My grandfather delivered over 4,000 babies in Jefferson, a small town in Northeast Ohio where I grew up. He impacted hundreds of lives for the better. He was always there to comfort his patients and made house calls through the worst storms in the snowbelt. Stories of the things my grandfather had done for patients were a regular part of my childhood. While I understand that we practice in a totally different era than my grandfather did starting in the mid-1900s, one of the biggest reasons I am going into family medicine is our ability to make a difference in our patient’s lives.

Another crucial aspect of medicine is understanding there are circumstances out of your control. Like rafting, sometimes the ride or office visit is defined in how you handle these situations. When I was 9 my dad had a brain tumor, he recovered, but had a reoccurrence with a more harsh impact. Immediately following his surgery and radiation, he could not remember me or any of my sibling’s names. He could not eat with silverware. We were told he might never recover. As a 9-year-old, and the oldest child in my family, it was very difficult.

Amazingly, he did get better, and even worked as a dentist for a few more years. But there are still lasting effects, he has a hard time speaking and cannot read or drive. Through all this, I have seen a medical miracle, and have also had the feeling of helplessness. Dealing with the after-effects of the second surgery has developed my personality in a way that could not have been done through any volunteer activity. I have realized that medicine has its limitations. With the help of the dementia care elective I participated in and through my own experience, I have realized it is not just the patient, but also the family who struggles with an illness. Whether it is a brain tumor, diabetes or weight loss, the behavior of a patient is influenced by many factors. Sometimes an extra minute to understand a patient’s family can make a difference in more lives than just the patient’s.

All of my experiences as a son, grandson and raft guide contribute to the chameleon that hopes to help my patients to the best of my ability and try to truly understand their needs as a family medicine doctor.