

Faces of FRONTIER: *FOCUSED ON THE MISSION*



Julie McCarron, CNM
FNU Graduate, Class 16

Julie McCarron, CNEP Class 16, and CNEP graduate Sonja Martin-Young are “living the midwifery dream in Homer, Alaska.” The two Frontier graduates are part of a small midwifery practice established about 30 years ago, a collaborative practice with three midwives, a retired midwife who covers calls during vacations, and four family practice doctors. The midwives handle all the obstetric care and consult and transfer care to the backup doctor when necessary. They also have two consulting OB-GYNs who come to Homer from Anchorage once a month and a general surgeon who performs any C-sections. The nurse-midwives attend about 80 to 90 percent of the births in Homer at a small community hospital with three labor and delivery nurses (LPRNs).

Homer has a population of about 5,000 in the city itself with a catchment area of about 11,000. The practice serves a diverse population, including some Native villages across the bay and members of the Russian Old Believer community, who represent about a third of the women served. The Russian Old Believers are a Russian Orthodox religious group that was banished from Russia during the Russian Revolution. They live in three separate villages around Homer. After leaving Russia, the Russian Old Believers went to China then Uruguay, Brazil and Bolivia, then came to Canada and the United States, where they have established settlements in Alaska, Oregon and Washington. “They are a wonderful group to work with and have unique needs with women’s healthcare and religious customs and beliefs,” McCarron says. “They wear beautiful, colorful full-length dresses and head coverings. The married men have beards.” Russian Old Believers fast several times a year, McCarron says, so nutritional issues such as anemia are common. Families are large, although the women seem to be having fewer children than they used to, she says, and many from the less strict villages use birth control.

They also tend to marry young and embrace traditional gender roles, with the men working to support the family, often in the fishing industry, and the women working at home. They are strong women, McCarron says, and are the backbones of their families. Russian Old Believers have cars, electricity and cell phones, but most do not have computers. The population speaks a Russian dialect with most of the young women born in Alaska speaking English as well. McCarron says an interpreter is often needed, as some women who were born in South America and came to Alaska as brides speak Portuguese or Spanish and Russian.

“There is so much more we could tell you about this wonderful group of people, our community and our midwifery practice,” McCarron writes in a recent note to Frontier, “but I’ll leave it at this for now.”

McCarron and Martin-Young are among many Frontier alumni living and practicing in Alaska who are furthering the legacy of Mrs. Breckinridge by providing healthcare services in this underserved area.

We appreciate their dedication to the mission.

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