

Filling the gap

Chip and Mandy Whitaker bring pharmacy services to underserved communities

Once upon a time it seems there was a corner drug store in every city and town around the country. You could say hello to friends, get your medication, and maybe treat yourself to a soft drink from the soda fountain while you were there.

These days, there are fewer corner drug stores, having been replaced by mega-chains and squeezed by well-heeled PBMs. Still, independent community pharmacy endures, showing how good it was and how good it can still be. In more ways than one, husband and wife pharmacists Chip and Mandy Whitaker represent the best of independent pharmacy. Compassionate and caring, they are devoted to helping their patients achieve optimal outcomes – often under challenging circumstances.

Their passion to serve others has led Chip and Mandy to open Whitaker Drugs pharmacies in three Alabama communities – Camden, Greenville and Opelika – that desperately needed them.

“I think it all comes down to helping people. I mean that that’s the bottom line,” Chip says. “With what we’re doing, we have a great opportunity to positively affect the lives of the people in these communities. That’s probably the main reason that we had a desire to go out on our own and do this.”

As the numbers can attest, too many communities are lacking any kind of health care presence. Several years ago, the University of Southern California Mann School of Pharmacy, the USC Schaeffer Center, the Spatial Sciences



**WHITAKER
DRUGS** 
Our Family Serving Yours



All photos by Mack Russell

by Chris Linville

Institute, and NCPA began an initiative to track pharmacy shortage areas (commonly known as “pharmacy deserts”) throughout the United States. According to the statistics, 28 percent of neighborhoods in Alabama are pharmacy shortage areas, affecting 1,186,499 residents. About 53 percent of shortage areas in Alabama are in rural areas. The data analyzed in the initiative is from 2020 and further research to update those numbers is ongoing.

Going out of their way to help comes naturally for the Whitakers. Mandy recalls meeting with a family member of a hospice patient at the pharmacy on New Year’s Eve who needed medication because nothing else was open.

“It’s not a big deal for me to run up there real fast and get something for somebody’s family member,” she says. “But it means the world to them. It’s really a blessing to be able to do that for people.”

PHARMACY PATH

Chip was born and raised in rural West Alabama. Both his parents are pharmacists. His father Chuck practiced in a pharmacy in Linden, Ala., and his mom Carolyn worked for an independent in Thomasville, Ala.

Not surprisingly, he decided to follow in their footsteps.

“That was basically my goal the whole time,” Chip says. “I saw what they did at an early age and got a glimpse of that. I saw how they really tried to help people in those communities, because they are both very rural areas. I think I recognized from a pretty young age that, hey, this is a pretty important deal. I could see them helping people, and I guess that’s what kind of drew me to it.”

Mandy grew up in Montgomery, Ala. She didn’t have a family pharmacy background. That she was going to be the third generation of her family to attend Auburn University was a given, as she says with a laugh, “We bleed orange and blue in our house.”

She was undecided about what to study, but with an affinity for math and science, she saw pharmacy as an interesting profession. She went directly into the pre-pharmacy curriculum, and straight through pharmacy school, graduating from the Auburn University Harrison School of Pharmacy in 2006 with her PharmD.

Auburn was in Chip’s blood as well, as his parents were both graduates. He enrolled there also, receiving his PharmD in 2008.

Chip and Mandy met in pharmacy school and began dating. They were married in 2009 after Chip graduated. Mandy had taken a position at Walgreens after graduating, and Chip began working for the Target Corporation. Chip eventually joined Walgreens and both advanced from staff pharmacists to store management.

GOING INTO BUSINESS

Over the next few years Chip and Mandy continued working in the chain environment. In 2012 their daughter Mason was born and in 2013 they welcomed son Charlie. Mandy says the demand of working while raising two small children made things challenging. Chip was becoming increasingly dissatisfied working at a corporate chain and had the desire to run his own store.

“We worked several positions during our time and stint (in the corporate world) before kind of having the urge to go out and do something different,” Chip says.

In the mid-2010s, the Whitakers began looking for places to own their own pharmacy. At the time, Chip’s dad was working at a pharmacy in Camden.

“We had just kind of started looking around anywhere, just somewhere that there was a need that we could fill,” Mandy says. “And Camden was one of the places that we had looked at and his dad knew we had been over there looking at a spot next to the Piggly Wiggly to potentially rent.”

However, at the time there was another independent in town so finding a fit was becoming difficult.

“But the day after we looked at that retail space, his dad was working at Fred’s Pharmacy, which was a chain,” Mandy says. “He called and said, ‘Y’all aren’t going to believe this, but they’ve just let us know that Fred’s has bought out the independent.’”

That meant a small town was going to be left without an independent pharmacy, which provided an opening.

“Typically, small towns are really good about supporting their local businesses,” Mandy says. “And Camden is not far from where Chip grew up. It was just a lot like moving home for him. It was a little more of an adjustment for me. But through a lot of prayer and God working for things to fall into place, it allowed us to leave Auburn and move to Camden and open that store there.”

Chip and Mandy’s passion is providing high-quality pharmacy care for patients who need it the most, that’s why they have opened pharmacies in underserved areas.

HELP FOR A STRUGGLING COMMUNITY

Whitaker Drugs in Camden opened in January 2017. Camden, with a population just shy of 2,000 people, is located in Wilcox County, Ala., and to say it's not exactly affluent is an understatement. Research by USC lists the entire county as a pharmacy shortage area.

"Wilcox County is one of the poorest counties in the entire United States," Chip says. "It's been on the top 10 list in the past. And it's very rural. Some places do not even have running water. It's very poverty-stricken. I mean, it just really hits you when you are there, and you see it. You see the difficulties. But we felt that we could make a difference and provide a positive impact."



"With what we're doing, we have a great opportunity to positively affect the lives of the people in these communities."





“We have a lot of support here in Greenville. I do feel like it was a community that just needed it.”



If Chip wanted to be his own boss, he was getting a crash course. He served as staff also. At least initially.

“Literally when Chip first opened it, he was a one-man show. It was just him,” Mandy says. “We took a bunch of Hot Pockets and freezer meals and put them in the back because he couldn’t even leave to get lunch. And the kids and I were working on transitioning over to there. I was trying to let them finish out the school year in Auburn before we moved over in May.”

Chip and Mandy quickly realized they were going to need to go above and beyond to help a struggling community. One of the most important early services they instituted was free prescription delivery anywhere in the county.

Chip and Mandy not only provide prescriptions, but a full menu of clinical services to help patient outcomes.

"It didn't take us long to become aware that some of the people in these rural areas didn't have reliable transportation and were doing without their medication or having to pay somebody to go to take them to town to get their medication," he says. "So we started that service, bought a little Chevy Spark and had it wrapped in the Whitaker Drugs logo. We're able to provide medications to people out in the county who were struggling to have access."

Not surprisingly, many of their patients have multiple disease states, such as diabetes, hypertension, and hyperlipidemia. Synchronizing medications is one step in the battle.

Camden customer Ardella Tolar says, "I thank God for Whitaker Drugs, because they don't make me feel like just a customer, they make me feel like family and a friend. Whitaker Drugs is very dependable, and I trust them to get the job done. I just love them and their employees' sweet spirit!"

Whitaker Drugs provide a wide range of services at all of its locations. Along with med sync, it also includes durable medical equipment, medication therapy management, long-term care, health screenings, immunizations and multi-dose packaging. They do a bit of everything for patients, including blood pressure checks.

"Primary care can be hard to find," Chip says. "There are providers, but as you might imagine, in that type of an area, there's a lot of times people come in and we are the first point of contact."

Chip and Mandy also work to help their patients understand what their prescription drug coverage options are and what the best plan for them might be.

"I call it financial planning. In our case it's related to what they're paying out of pocket for prescriptions," Chip says. "People sometimes ask if I'm a pharmacist or a CPA. But we know that the best options might change from year to year, so we try to make sure our patients are getting everything as cheaply and effectively as they can every year. That's something that we've tried to do from the start, helping patients with their financial planning for prescriptions. It's a big deal."

ANOTHER COMMUNITY TO SERVE

One of the long-time technicians at the Camden Whitaker Drugs was commuting from Greenville, a town of just more than 7,000 residents about 45 minutes to the east. The technician, Alicia, thought Greenville could use another pharmacy, and Chip was looking to expand what it was doing in Camden to other communities.

Alicia had a connection with the Greenville mayor and put the Whitakers in touch with him.

"He helped show us around, helped us find a good location, and kind of put some pieces in place to make it possible for us to open the store in Greenville," Mandy says.

The Greenville location was built from the ground up and is located in a small strip mall. It opened in May of 2022. It has also become home for Chip and Mandy.

"We have a lot of support here in Greenville. I do feel like it was a community that just needed it," Mandy says.

Greenville customer Bethany Raulerson says, "We have been using Whitaker Drugs for about eight months. The great thing about Whitaker Drugs is I am able to call and talk to a 'real person' if I have a question. They always go above and beyond. They are a true addition to Greenville."

REPLACING A CHAIN

In 2023, in Opelika, Ala., located just up the road from Auburn in Lee County, a major provider of pharmacy services in the community was about to be shut down. Winn-Dixie, a subsidiary of Southeastern Grocers, was in the process of being purchased by grocery giant Aldi. The Winn-Dixie stores would remain in operation, but their in-store pharmacies would no longer operate. The move affected roughly 2,500 patients in the Opelika area.

Learning about this, Chip and Mandy were intrigued. Next to one of the Winn-Dixies was a vacant retail space. Ironically, it was at that Winn-Dixie where Mandy had her first job out of high school as a technician after moving to Auburn.

Once they decided to open an Opelika store, they hired Cheryl Wood as manager. She had served a long stint as pharmacy manager at Winn-Dixie in Auburn and had hired Chip for his first job in pharmacy as a technician at Winn-Dixie 20 years earlier.

Former Winn-Dixie pharmacy manager Jacqueline Katich also came on board to help run the store. She and Chip graduated from pharmacy school together in 2008.

"I was kind of a full circle moment," Chip says.

Fast Facts: Whitaker Drugs (three locations in central Alabama)

Established: 2017 (Camden, Ala.), 2022 (Greenville, Ala.), 2023 (Opelika, Ala.)

Management: Chip and Mandy Whitaker, owners

Products and services: includes standard retail, free delivery, medication synchronization, durable medical equipment, medication therapy management, long-term care, health screenings, immunizations, and multi-dose packaging and insurance consulting.

NCPA member since: 2024

“We thought this was an opportunity for us and it was a need for the community,” Mandy says. “This community was losing a pharmacy. These pharmacies had been there for more than 20 years. They were just going to close. These pharmacists needed jobs and the people there needed a pharmacy.

“I’ve been told before if you’re looking for God’s plan for you, look at where your desires fit the need of a community and it all comes together,” she says

Compared to Wilcox and Butler counties, Lee is a growing area with more than 183,000 residents, a major university and a growing number of retirees and young professionals. The areas outside of Opelika and Auburn are largely rural with small towns.

“It’s probably a bit more diverse,” Chip says.

The Opelika store opened late in 2023 and has a similar business model as the other two. Though still early, Chip is confident about its prospects.

Opelika customer Rita Norgard is certainly appreciative, saying, “Whitaker Drugs provides great customer service. I’ve been coming to this area for many years to fill my prescriptions, and I’m thankful they have stepped in to help fill the void in this part of Opelika after my old pharmacy closed down.”

FINDING A HOME

The three pharmacies have about 30 employees combined, and seven pharmacists. (Chip’s dad works part time at the Camden location.) The Camden store was purchased in part through savings and some family help. For the Greenville and Opelika locations they were able to obtain Small Business Administration loans.

Chip and Mandy spend time in all the stores on a regular basis, but their home base is in Greenville. Mandy says they lived in Camden for a while and enjoyed it, but as their children got older, it became more practical in Greenville.

“Our kids both eat, sleep, and breathe all things sports,” she says. “We had to drive 45 minutes each way just to let them play city baseball and softball. When we opened the store here in Greenville and it started doing well, it just provided a few more opportunities for our kids at the stage in life that they were in.”

Of course, she adds, “We’re Auburn fans. We like Lee County. Anytime we have an opportunity to go over there we do and work closely with them, but we don’t spend nearly the time as far as staffing the pharmacy over there as we do between Greenville and Camden.”

The stores operate on the same computer system, but for the most part they are separate entities under the Whitaker umbrella, Chip says.

“We talk often (among the stores),” he says. “If there’s any issues we need to discuss, we’re having those conversations, and sometimes it’s daily.”

COMMUNITY PHARMACY ENDURES

As much as they enjoy owning and running their own independent pharmacies, like other owners they face the seemingly unrelenting issues presented by PBM practices. Chip doesn’t hide his frustration.

“We have got to get people on board with a fair and transparent pricing model that continues to work for people like us and people that are in these situations with these community pharmacies,” he says. “I mean, the underwater claims are real, and we see it in all three of our stores on a daily basis. We’ve got to have some movement on that front.”

He adds, “I think we need to bring it back to the forefront that, hey, we’ve got patients and people in these rural areas that need these medications that are necessary for the maintenance of life. And we are the providers of these solutions and these medicines.”

Still, despite all of the challenges, community pharmacy endures.

“We do try to instill and express to our employees our goals and definitions of success. We really are here for the patient,” Mandy says. “We have to make a living, we have to eat, but we don’t do that without them. It may be something just as simple as providing a smile as somebody walks in the door. We try and be

Chip and Mandy say Whitaker Drugs is not just a pharmacy, but a friend and neighbor in each of their communities.

good, you know, even if we're busy saying, 'Hey, we'll be with you in just a second.' Acknowledging people with a smile goes a long way."

Chip also understands that the business side is important, but patient care is paramount.

"There's nothing more rewarding for me personally than being able to help somebody in a way where I have the time to do it. And with the resources to do it," he says. "I never felt that I could sufficiently do that working for a corporation."

He adds, "What we are doing matters, and with our employees, I try to tell them that all the time. You may think that it's simple and in some cases it may be, but don't underestimate the impact we can have on their lives. And we do that."

When asked if they would consider opening another pharmacy, Chip says, "If there is a community need and a situation that we feel we are being led to make a move, I think that we are open to those possibilities." ■

Chris Linville is America's Pharmacist® managing editor.



"We do try to instill and express to our employees our goals and definitions of success. We really are here for the patient."

