More than 40 years ago, Lahey Clinic lab worker Mimi Reardon sat in on resident rounds and realized immediately: “This is what I want to do.” Now she looks back on four decades of accomplishment in improving primary care for all Vermonters.
Gillian Boyd grew up on her family’s dairy farm in the small community of Wilmington, Vermont, where, she says, “I’m related to half the town.” She has always wanted to work in medicine, although none of her many local relatives were role models in that arena.

This fall, Boyd becomes the first member of her immediate family to attend a four-year college when she starts the University of New England’s physician assistant program in Biddeford, Maine. Boyd gives significant credit for her interest in a medical career to her participation in the Southern Vermont Area Health Education Center (AHEC) MedQuest program, which provides high school students with hands-on health care career exposure.

Boyd is excited about going away to school, and quite certain she’ll return to Vermont to practice after seeing a little more of the world. “Yes,” she reflects, “I’ll come back. Absolutely.”

This is the kind of story that is music to the ears of Mildred (Mimi) Reardon, M.D. ‘67 as she steps down after thirteen years as associate dean for primary care at the College of Medicine. And it is one of many. In addition to Gillian Boyd, there’s Sharon Fine, M.D., who was able to accept a family practice position in Danville thanks in no small part to the AHEC loan repayment program and is now also president of the Northeastern Vermont AHEC board; there’s Noah Boyd, a senior at Middlebury College who is enrolled in the Pre-medical Enhancement Program (PEP), which provides high school students with hands-on health care career exposure.

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Like Gillian Boyd, the young Mimi Reardon had no role models in health care careers as she grew up in the Boston area, but she always felt the tug of science. The daughter of a teacher and a dairy bacteriologist, she followed her mother’s path and went to Teachers’ College where, she says, “I took all the science courses in the first two years.” One of her prof-essors saw her promise and encouraged her to transfer to Northeastern University where she majored in biology and minored in chemistry.

Her eventual career path did not become clear, however, until she took a job at a laboratory of Boston’s Lahey Clinic. Carless, and living 10 miles outside Boston in Newton at the time, Reardon would hitch a ride with a neighbor into work and arrive two hours early. “They let me sit in on resi-dent rounds,” she recalls with obvious relish for her experience. “I was really intrigued by science and I was really committed to serving people and being actively involved in caring for people. I knew immediately: This is what I want to do.”

With characteristic determination, Reardon applied to the UVM College of Medicine. In 1965, she became one of five women in a class of 50 med-ical students. “It wasn’t easy,” she acknowledged, “but I loved medicine and I really enjoyed medical school.” Her decision to practice primary care was perhaps easier — and also telling. “Yes, I did a year of fellowship in hematology-oncology, but I was impressed by the vastness of internal medicine. She stayed involved with the College of Medicine teaching students and residents, as well as participating on many committees involved with admissions, alumni, faculty, and house staff while also working with organizations including the American Cancer Society and the Champlain Valley Hospice Program. Mike Scollins, M.D., first met Reardon in 1971 when he came to Burlington to complete his residency and then join Aesculapius, where he and Reardon worked together for 26 years. “Mimi cared. She was always personally interested in what would be best for the patients, and she always found the time to do a little bit more,” Scollins says.

Her clinical work was complemented by involvement with the Vermont Medical Society (VMS). “It’s contrast to our interactions with indi-vidual patients,” Reardon explains, “the medical society helps us as a profession to interface with important groups and organizations in health care like state government, insurers, and Congress. I think having this voice for the profession is incred-i-ibly important.” She first served on the VMS council and then became the Medical Society’s president in 1986, proud to be the first woman in that role in its over two-hundred-year history (and quick to add that there have been two other women presidents since). As the VMS delegate to the American Medical Association for six years, she was also able to participate in development of national policy. Through her work with VMS, Reardon also pur-sued an initiative to help evaluate and measure quality in health care on a statewide basis, which led to the creation of the non-profit Vermont Program for Excellent Care. She later went on to serve as the Program’s president and was named its first “mastership” winner in 2002. Reardon spearheaded the introduction of MedQuest, a program to expand gifted students’ awareness and knowledge of the medical field. It has been called a “state treasure.” If Frank Capra directed “It’s a Wonderful Life,” it would stretch on for days.

For twenty-seven years, Reardon enjoyed a rewarding career as an internist, earning the affection and respect of both patients and fellow physi-cians. In addition to maintaining a busy practice, she stayed involved with the College of Medicine teaching students and residents, as well as participating on many committees involved with admissions, alumni, faculty, and house staff while also working with organizations including the American Cancer Society and the Champlain Valley Hospice Program.
Quality in Health Care for which she served as board president for close to a decade.

Reardon earned a reputation as a passionate, articulate voice for health care issues with a unique capacity to enlist support and assistance. “Mimi has woven a web of personal connections to people. She gives you the feeling your contributions can make a difference,” says Newport pediatrician Mike Moseley, M.D. “She’s very much in tune with local initiatives but not a person coming down from the mount with tablets of stone.” Reardon became known for her ability to remember the specifics of everyone’s family or pet — and ask about them without fail. “When she goes to the state-house, she’s the only person I’ve seen down there who everyone hugs,” marvels Liz Cote, current director of the UVM AHEC program.

Vermont State Senator Jim Leddy, who served 20 years as director of Howard Human Services as well as eight years in the state legislature, has known Reardon for many years as both a physician and as a health care advocate. “When you’re talking to Mimi you’re dealing with someone who not only knows her subject, but cares deeply. She’s been able to take her years of primary care and translate them into policy,” Leddy says. “Her style is so gentle, so kind, so embracing. Persistence is very much part of who Mimi is, but she’s never in your face. She is very clear and very specific on where she sees the needs and how best to address them. Her knowledge and her style in combination are her strength.”

Despite this obvious gift, Reardon had no plans for a full-time career in advocacy until Dean John Frymoyer, M.D. and Executive Dean John Evans, Ph.D., approached her in 1993 to ask if she would consider the newly created position of Associate Dean for Primary Care and lead a concentrated effort to improve access to primary care across the state, especially in underserved areas. “I think it was a time when there was very clear recognition that primary care needed to come to the forefront at the College, in the state of Vermont, and in the nation for that matter,” Evans recalls. “And we needed a person as the focal point. We were looking for the quintessential primary care provider in Vermont and Mimi’s name kept coming up.”

“Mimi was clearly very well respected and, through her work with the state medical society, she knew and understood the legislature and had connections with primary care doctors around the state,” agrees Frymoyer. “We needed someone to bring together all those working in primary care and also someone to reach out into the state and try to understand the state’s needs. She was a slam dunk.”

Reardon was intrigued, but also torn. “In my heart of hearts,” she says when pressed, “I’m a practicing physician.” Although she juggled her practice and the associate dean position for the first five years, “There was just not enough time to get everything done in both places,” she laments. She concluded reluctantly that she could probably help the field of primary care — and her beloved adopted state of Vermont — better as an advocate than as a practitioner. “I think of the primary care clinician as being the most important person for a patient over most of their time of need...”

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Mimi Reardon and former Dean John Evans look over plans for the Medical Education Center’s “Reardon Classroom.”

HIGHLIGHTS of a Career in Service

Dr. Mimi Reardon has devoted her career in service to patients, to health care, and to Vermont. These are just a few of her notable achievements.

VERMONT’S AREA HEALTH EDUCATION CENTERS

The AHEC model was developed at a federal level in the late 1970s and start-up funding is provided through the federal Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) grants with a university-based school of medicine housing a central state AHEC program office to work with independent, not-for-profit regional centers. Since the AHEC program was first established in Vermont in 1996, the three regional centers in St. Johnsbury, St. Albans, and Springfield have earned more than $10 million in federal grants and contracts to integrate health care services across professional disciplines, developed regionally responsive health education programs and resources, and built Vermont’s health care workforce, especially in underserved areas of the state. The centers have brought continuing education programs to over 1,500 health professionals and exposed over 4,000 Vermont students from grade school through university to health career opportunities. Every year, AHEC places over 650 health profession students in training opportunities across the state; supports 33 Community Health Information and Resource Centers and works to bring public health improvement education programs to Vermonters; and grants over half a million dollars in educational loan repayment awards to approximately 150 doctors, dentists, and nurses who fill critical access gaps in Vermont’s health care system with an 89 percent retention rate, the highest in the nation.

THE FREEMAN MEDICAL SCHOLARS PROGRAM

The Freeman Medical Scholars Program is the result of a gift from the Freeman Foundation of New York. The Freeman family, which has deep roots in Vermont, found in Reardon someone who shares their passion for recruiting and retaining the best physicians for Vermont. This program awards scholarships to UVM College of Medicine students who make a commitment to practice medicine in Vermont after completion of medical school and residency and fellowship training, as well as to make educational loan repayment awards for physicians for Vermont regardless of where they went to medical school. Reardon has been involved in the development and implementation of the program as its director and has helped to recruit and retain over 100 physicians (with some in each of Vermont’s fourteen counties) throughout the state in the past six years, with specialties ranging from oncology to orthopedics to primary care.

VERMONT PROGRAM FOR QUALITY IN HEALTH CARE

Reardon was the founding board president of this non-profit formed in 1981 that brings together representatives of consumers, hospitals, insurers, HMOs, employers, physicians and state government to improve the quality, efficiency, and cost effectiveness of Vermont’s health care system; define health care quality, working with health care providers and others to develop legitimate standards of care and indicators of quality; measure health care quality through data collection and analysis; and improve health care quality by providing information and education to practitioners and consumers.

THE VERMONT MEDICAL SOCIETY’S EDUCATION AND RESEARCH FOUNDATION SCHOLARSHIPS

Currently, Reardon is a VMS councilor-at-large and serves as president of the Vermont Medical Society’s Educational and Research Foundation, which offers annual scholarships to third-year medical students who make a commitment to practice medicine in Vermont, especially its less served areas.
over most of their time of need in the medical system,” she says, “the person the patient goes to find out how to maintain their good health, how to do the most efficient thing to get back into good health, and to direct them to other resources and people when necessary. “She’s everywhere,” says Evans, “an influencer of governors, of senators, of public health...she’s the glue that brings everything together.”

Another legendary aspect of Reardon’s reputation is her ability to turn “no” into “yes.” As one colleague says, “She’s a force to be reckoned with.” She applied for the initial federal AHEC grant three times before the funding was finally awarded. “Dr. Reardon had a vision for how the College of Medicine, in partnership with communities across the state, could work to improve the health of Vermonters,” says Theresa Alberghini DiPalma, who worked with Reardon as senior legislative assistant for health for U.S. Senator Patrick Leahy in the early 1990s, and is currently senior vice president for government and external relations at Fletcher Allen Health Care. “Anyone who knows Dr. Reardon knows that her vision is matched only by her stamina.”

Even in retirement, Reardon will stay involved with some key projects: ensuring that the Freeman Medical Scholars program connects graduating residents with needy areas in Vermont and further developing the new Premedical Enhancement Program. She will also, she hopes, have more time to relax and travel with her two close friends, Pat Connelly and Sarah Beers, with whom she has lived for 33 years, “The truth of the matter,” she says, “is that I would never have been able to do a fraction of what I have done if it were not for them.”

Although, as her friends know well, Mimi Reardon’s retirement is likely to be as busy as most people’s working life. She may have left direct patient care behind, but she will never leave behind the responsibility she feels to patients. “She wants quality patient care for every single Vermonter,” says Senator Jim Liddy. “There is a commitment in this state for people to take care of one another and Mimi is the embodiment of that. She’s a doctor’s doctor, but ultimately and more importantly, she’s a patient’s doctor.”

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Evans and Frymoyer knew that once engaged, Reardon would be a formidable ally in their efforts to raise the profile of primary care and improve health care access across Vermont. Both look back on Reardon’s tenure as Associate Dean for Primary Care with intense satisfaction and gratitude. Her work securing funding and establishing three regional AHECs in Vermont with the broad charter of developing community-based partnerships to improve the health of all Vermonters has been “a singular achievement,” says Frymoyer. From the AHECs wide range of education, placement, and support programs, to the students, residents, and health care professionals who have been convinced to return or to stay in Vermont thanks to AHEC and Freeman financial assistance; to the Doctoring in Vermont program that ensures every medical student will spend time working hands-on with primary care mentors, “She’s everywhere,” says Evans, “an influencer of governors, of senators, of public health...she’s the glue that brings everything together.”

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