



Dr. Jackson Griggs, chief executive officer of the Family Health Center, has helped keep the public aware of the COVID-19 pandemic and continually urges people to be safe to avoid infection. Photo by Rod Aydelotte.

# Person of the Year

Dr. Jackson Griggs focuses on community during COVID-19

By Ken Sury

At one point during college, Dr. Jackson Griggs considered becoming an English professor.

Fortunately for Waco, he found his career in family medicine.

As chief executive officer of the Family Health Center, Griggs focuses on how to improve health care systems for patients, especially the socio-economically disadvantaged who benefit greatly from primary care.

And this year, with the ongoing threat of the coronavirus, Griggs has been at the forefront in addressing the disease in McLennan County and sharing the message of health and safety.

It's for that leadership that Waco Today has chosen him as its Person of the Year.

When Waco Mayor Kyle Deaver on March 17 announced a local disaster

and public health emergency because of the coronavirus, Griggs was at the press conference alongside officials with the Waco-McLennan County Public Health District to offer their expertise.

The mayor's order shut down places and events where more than 50 people could gather as a way to curb the spread of the disease.

"As vice chair of the health district board and CEO of Family Health Center, I had a more public opportunity to get out in front of the community and share what the public health and medical systems were seeing in this disease," Griggs said.

Mayor Deaver and County Judge Scott Felton quickly recognized there was a need to be having conversations on a regular basis with the press to share information. They initiated weekly press

conferences, a process that continues.

Deaver said having Griggs involved has been invaluable.

"He's a fairly new CEO at the Family Health Center taking over for a great leader in Dr. Roland Goertz," Deaver said. "For Jackson to walk in and be hit with this COVID crisis, he's done an outstanding job."

"He's a great listener. He studies the data. He's empathetic. He gets the needs of our community in a way not everyone does."

Griggs, 43, said he believes that he and the Family Health Center had a particular involvement.

"As a physician and from a physician's frame of reference, it felt very natural to begin to think about what's our role in

➤ Continued on Page 16



educating on health behaviors as a center,” he said. “How can we promote good information and counter misinformation? How can we provide services, not just to single individuals but to the whole community? What are the issues with equity and inequity that this particular public health crisis are creating and how do we rectify those inequities?”

“We didn’t have a playbook and so we were operating in large part by instinct. Thankfully, the core primary care philosophy of community-based orientation formed our response.”

Family medicine and community medicine are intimately tied together, he added.

“Philosophically, it’s a marriage of the social sciences and the biomedical sciences,” Griggs said. “It looks at an individual as a whole person that exists within community, so when there is a community health crisis, it feels very instinctual to move into addressing that crisis.”

## Dallas Native

Griggs grew up in Dallas, the youngest of four children and only son of Ann and Jack Griggs, who was in the restaurant business and banking.

He attended an all-boys school until the family moved to Abilene as Jack Griggs returned to his alma mater at Abilene Christian University to serve as dean of the College of Business Administration.

Griggs was now in a very different environment at Abilene Cooper High School.

“That was one of the important transformational moments of my life because I became really aware of the value of diversity and the beauty of all the varieties of people that I hadn’t known in my North Dallas enclave,” Griggs said.

After high school graduation he attended Abilene Christian. It was in college, he said, that he started wrestling with those life questions.

“I was interested in the human condition,” Griggs said. “I was asking all the big questions at the time. What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to suffer? How do we endure



Dr. Jackson Griggs and his wife, Erin, met at Abilene Christian University and married in 1999. Their children are Julia, 15, and Elliot, 11. Photo by Rod Aydelotte.

suffering? Why are societies so different from each other? Is there a God? The big questions.”

As an English major, he found it informative to study the humanities. “I was dealing with my own issues of ‘what is truth,’ so it was valuable for me to engage in contemporary literature.”

But something else was tugging at his mind.

“I toyed with being an English professor for a while, but what I really wanted was the applied humanities,” Griggs said. “I wanted to put these questions into action and medicine seemed to marry my interest in problem-solving and the biomechanical and biological sciences with my love for people and understanding the human condition.”

In a three-month span in 1999, he graduated from Abilene Christian, got married, and with new wife Erin moved to Houston to start his studies at the University of Texas Health Science Center in Houston.

## Medical School

Griggs still recalls the words from an introductory lecture given by the president of the UT Health Science Center to the medical school class.

“What he said at the time was ‘Your work as physicians is very, very important. But I want to be very clear that your contribution to health in a community is only one portion of a whole. If you get too focused on the biomedical and

you miss all of the other contributors to health, you won’t understand what brings health into a community and you won’t leverage your authority in the community for the most good.’”

Those words resonated, he said.

Like his fellow med students, Griggs was exposed to the various facets of medical training. Eventually he considered becoming a specialist and was debating between cardiology and rheumatology.

He recalls one day stepping out of the office of the chief of medicine, who was a rheumatologist and had counseled Griggs against becoming a family doctor.

“I called this friend and mentor of mine, who was a family doctor, and he said, ‘Let me tell you about my day,’” Griggs said. “He didn’t try to give me an argument about family medicine. He instead said, ‘Let me tell you about my first patient of the day.’ He told me about the course of his day and the personal relationships he had with his patients. Not as a disease, but as a human being, and as a human being in community.”

“When he told me about his day, I was hooked. The rest of my experiences in medical school corroborated that I wanted to be a family doctor.”

During his third year in medical school he was looking at residency programs.

“I was drawn to the Waco program because it was the best in the country, as far as I could tell,” he said. “I had lots of opportunities, but the program in Waco was my top pick. I was so thrilled to be

matched with the Waco program.”

The Family Health Center's family practice residency program is in its 50th year and ranked in the top 2% nationally among family medicine residency training programs.

It has graduated more than 400 family doctors in that time. Each year it receives nearly 1,000 applicants and accepts 12 to the program.

“These are the cream of the crop,” Griggs said.

Griggs said he thought after finishing the residency program he would do international health care work.

“We bought our house thinking we'd be living in it for three years and we lived in that same house for 18 years,” Griggs said.

## In Waco Long-Term

During his second year of residency, a faculty member pulled him aside and told him to consider being an academic family doctor. Griggs was chief resident his third year and after graduation in June 2006 he stayed on the residency faculty.

He initially was part-time faculty and one of the doctors who opened the Bellmead Community Clinic. He became full-time faculty his second year out of residency.

“I fell in love with the organization,” Griggs said. “I fell in love with our patients. I fell in love with the people at Family Health Center. So when I was offered the opportunity to stay, I took it instantly.”

While on faculty he continued to practice the full spectrum of family medicine, he said.

He was named curriculum director in 2008, putting him in charge of residency curriculum, which included how rotations are arranged. Seven years ago he became associate program director and did that for five years before taking over as CEO of the Family Health Center in February 2019. Goertz trained him for six weeks before officially retiring.

Griggs said the residency program

➤ *Continued on Page 18*

# UPTOWN/DOWNTOWN

W A C O



## SPARROW

Waco's newest  
antique store!

**NOW OPEN**

- Unique gifts
- Furniture
- Vintage treasures
- Handmade goods

Just a 5 minute drive from the Silos

1518 Austin Avenue, Waco, Texas 76701  
[www.sparrow-waco.com](http://www.sparrow-waco.com)

**To Advertise in  
Waco Today,  
please call:  
(254) 757-6958**





had a profound impact on him.

"I went into medicine where it felt more like I was the one who had a lot to give," he said. "When I started residency I saw my patients as those who had a lot to receive from me. My experience in residency training really flipped that to where I realized I was the beneficiary of the relationship between myself and my patients.

"My patients became my teachers not only in clinic medicine, but also in life."

He laments that between his administrative duties as CEO and dealing with the pandemic he hasn't been able to connect with patients as before. He hasn't been in an exam room in nine months, he said.

## Pandemic Response

As the COVID-19 threat grew in the spring, plans went into action.

"A lot of the early work was securing testing, PPE (personal protective equipment) and educating the community," Griggs said. "We had Facebook Live events and a video series called Corona 101 that we were pushing out through social media." The series presented two-minute-long educational videos.

"We were thinking specifically about the populations that were most vulnerable to the disease. We had early evidence that that was aging adults, those with

chronic illnesses, and really very early in the pandemic in the United States we began to see that it was racial minorities, particularly African-Americans and Latinos that were disproportionately affected and had a higher hospitalization rate.

"That had a lot to do with that they didn't have the privilege to work at home and telecommute. They were at a lot of front-line jobs and were more exposed to the virus. They also didn't have the same access to health care and the same access to channels with good information."

A countywide racial equity commission was created to meet regularly to share data about race and seek insight on how to help fight the inequities in the disease. That was another beneficial step, Griggs said.

Griggs continues to share data weekly with city and county leaders, other medical officials and the news media as they track the pandemic locally.

"I've told the story of a lot of other people's good work," he said. "While I've been asked to share information, the health district has been so important."

He said that begins with Dr. Farley Verner, an infectious disease doctor, who is the health authority in Waco-McLennan County. Others include Vaidehi Shah, senior epidemiologist; Kelly Craine, communications director; and Margaret Cowart, health education program administrator. Deidra Emerson, the deputy city manager, also has been extremely important, he said.

From a health care vantage point,

Griggs points to the chief medical officers at the hospitals, Dr. Jim Morrison at Baylor Scott & White-Hillcrest, Dr. Brian Becker at Ascension Providence and Dr. Rich Haskett with the Providence Health Alliance.

Within his Family Health Center there's Dr. Kelley Reynolds, chief medical officer, and Dr. Ben Wilson, associate chief medical officer.

Griggs described Wilson as FHC's "internal COVID czar. He's done tremendous work to build our operations. We have four tent clinics and ran more than 13,000 tests." Of that, 2,200 tests were positive.

"They've been really pivotal to seeing that all our patients have access to testing and diagnosis," he added. "It's been a whole family enterprise to take care of our 59,000 patients during this public health crisis. If I were to go through the list of those to thank at the Family Health Center, it would be 570 long. Every one of our employees has had to work harder and longer and with more courage and perseverance than ever before."

Fernando Arroyo has been chief of staff at Family Health Center since January, right before the pandemic hit.

He said the heart and care Griggs has for the community is readily apparent.

"He keeps focused on the care of our patients and the care of our employees," Arroyo said. "It's not just a positivity he has, but a realistic optimism about what we can accomplish when we work together."

"One of the things I most appreciate about him is that he recognizes the gifts and abilities of the team members and empowers them to utilize their expertise."

Family Health Center has 15 clinical sites. Last year FHC had 250,000 office visits for primary care, mental health and oral health.

Until there is a safe vaccination, Griggs said it's imperative to follow the health protocols.

"There is no new magical message," he said. "The same message of physical distancing, avoiding crowds, especially gathering indoors, wearing a mask consistently with non-household members and hand hygiene. These are essential to reducing the spread of infection."



**R.J. Salinas Masonry**

Installation of  
Brick • Stone • Glass Block • Man Made Stone  
Natural Cut Thin Stone • Pavers • Flagstone

Construction of  
Mailboxes • Indoor and Outdoor Fireplaces • Fire Pits  
Replacement of Rusted Mailboxes  
Deteriorated Bricks  
Repair of Cracked Arches • Chimneys  
Masonry Cutouts

**Ask for Joseph Salinas!**  
Serving Waco and Surrounding Communities  
254.855.2819  
Fax: 254.848.4802  
Member of BBB and Carrying Workman's and General Liability

## Family Time

When Griggs does find personal time, he loves to spend it with his family. He and Erin have two children, Julia, 15, and Elliot, 11, who attend Live Oak Classical School.

“As a family, our most joyful moments have been camping at state and national parks — there’s a freedom and delight when you’re totally surrounded by God’s creative beauty,” he said. “I think we all share a sense in those times that all things and all manner of things will be well.

“At home, we love card games and board games, but Julia and Elliot are now routinely beating Erin and me ... at every game but Scrabble. Erin and I keep a modicum of dignity because of Scrabble.”

Griggs said his wife of 21 years is the most important influence on his life. “She’s the wisest person that I know and is a constant adviser and encourager to me. Her patience with me seems endless.”

Griggs also enjoys working outdoors in the soil.

“There’s nothing better than Texas heat and hands that smell like compost,” he said.

But he’ll also be digging into the ongoing work of navigating a pandemic and finding ways to help Family Health Center patients.

He said the words spoken by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1966 to the Convention of the Medical Committee for Human Rights in Chicago cut to the heart of the matter.

King said: “Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhumane.”

The need to improve health care systems is an important issue, he said.

“That has been a constant draw for me,” Griggs said. “How do we improve health care systems in order to deliver the best whole-person continuous primary care, mental health and dental care for populations. Of course, my heart is for those who have the most socio-economic need.

“That’s part and parcel with the messages and teachings of Christ. We are to be those who are actively identifying those who are marginalized and loving them, and embracing them, not as other but same. We need to transform the systems that keep them disadvantaged.”

## Honorable Mention

### Kyle Deaver

He completed two terms of service as Waco’s mayor on Nov. 17, but showed remarkable leadership in being front and center with the city’s response to the pandemic. He was among the first city leaders statewide to call for shelter-in-place and other restrictions in mid-March to help slow the spread of the coronavirus disease at its early outbreak. He continued to keep residents updated about the disease locally at weekly press conferences and urged residents to be diligent about safety protocols.



### Jeremy Everett

The executive director of the Baylor University Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty has fought against food insecurity for more than a decade, but 2020 saw its reach grow considerably. The Meals-to-You program begun by the collaborative expanded from 12 to 35 states plus Puerto Rico to feed rural low-income children. It was especially critical with schools shutting down because of COVID-19. A \$930,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture will launch a pilot program to encourage the purchase and consumption of milk.

## TEMPORARY & DIRECT HIRE

PROFESSIONAL

WAREHOUSE

OFFICE/CLERICAL

LIGHT INDUSTRIAL

# joblink

**We’ve moved 717 Jewell, Waco**

**399-WORK (9675)**

**JobLinktx.com**

**Waco Tribune-Herald**  
**2020**  
**HOT**  
**Readers’ Choice**  
**WINNER**  
**2013-2020**



**NIKKI ROMANO OATES**

*Locally Owned & Operated*