



BRAXTON FAMILY DENTISTRY

BRAXTON COUNTY, WV

DENTAL PRACTICE

The just over twenty two thousand inhabitants of rural Braxton County are fortunate to have Dr. Kristy Naternicola practicing dentistry in Sutton, West Virginia. Dr. Naternicola received her undergraduate education from West Virginia University and

graduated from the WVU School of Dentistry in 2006. She and her husband, and two children, live in Fairmont. Her practice, Braxton Family Dentistry, is located at 304 Riverview Drive in Sutton, West Virginia.

Dr. Naternicola purchased the practice from Dr. Laura Marple in June of 2017. Dr. Marple, born and raised in Sutton, started the practice in the downtown Sutton location in 1987. The process of Dr. Naternicola succeeding Dr. Marple began with Dr. Naternicola's desire to have her own practice after having served as an associate dentist in Fairmont for 11 years. With several dentists already serving the Fairmont area, Dr. Naternicola knew she would have to look elsewhere to establish her business. A chance meeting got the ball rolling.

Dr. Marple was not originally looking to sell her practice. Even after 37 years of the challenges of practicing dentistry in rural West Virginia, she was content to continue for a few more years.

In the fall of 2016, Dr. Naternicola's father was attending a WVU football game where he happened to be sitting behind Dr. Marple, and the two began talking. Upon discovering that Dr. Marple, like his daughter, was a dentist, he asked if she had ever considered selling the practice. She replied, "No, but maybe I should think about it."


Perhaps it was destiny that had the two dental professionals talking in earnest in early 2017, and when Dr. Marple's daughter, also a dentist, relocated to

South Carolina, a deal was negotiated. Six months later, it was official. When asked about an established female dentist turning her practice over to another female, Dr. Naternicola matter-of-factly offered, "I think patients like female dentists because we have smaller hands."

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Dr. Marple was more emphatic on this subject. "Personally, I think kids are less intimidated by female dentists and moms trust them. Female dentists are sensitive and tend to try to cause as little pain as possible. I really wanted to transition to another female dentist and finding Dr. Naternicola was a big part of my decision to sell."

This union, however destined it may have seemed, would not have come to fruition without the assistance of the Center for Rural Health Development. Dr. Naternicola had learned about the Center while perusing a dental magazine. Dr. Marple had also discovered the Center for Rural Health Development at about the same time and suggested that Dr. Naternicola contact the Center. While fate may have played a role in this succession, it was not enough to seal the deal.



Dr. Naternicola made the call that initiated the loan process. “Rob Dearing, CFO/Loan Fund Manager for the Center for Rural Health Development, Inc., was fantastic. He walked me through a stressful six-month process.” Rob referred Dr. Naternicola to the West Virginia Small Business Development Center (WWSBDC), from which she received business coaching that helped her with development of a business plan and financial projections. “It was quite in-depth, but I feel they had my best interests at heart and kept me on a straight path.” Dr. Naternicola believes that without the assistance of the Center for Rural Health

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Dr. Marple agreed the process was lengthy but was thrilled that it happened flawlessly. “It could not have gone better,” she assured. Dr. Marple has remained during the transition, gradually reducing


her time in the office. She continues to come in once every other week, and her name is still on the front door right under Dr. Naternicola’s. “I want Kristy to be successful, and I will do anything to ensure that success. Most of my patients have stayed on with Dr. Naternicola. She has a great personality, relates well to the patients, and the kids adore her. Finding a female dentist with over 10 years of experience has been a true blessing.”

Without the existence of Dr. Naternicola’s practice, Braxton County residents would most certainly go without regular dental care and suffer. As it is, Dr. Naternicola, travels 70 minutes each way to work and is only one of two dentists serving the entire county. The other dentist is fully booked on a regular basis, and Dr. Naternicola believes he could not have handled the overflow created by the loss of Dr. Marple’s practice. “I saw seven to eight patients today, and, at times, I see as many as 15 in a day. My dental hygienist sees 12 patients daily. Where would these folks go for dental treatment if we were not here to serve them?”

Without her practice, Dr. Naternicola knows that her patients would have had only two options: make the 66-mile, hour-long trip to Charleston or go without treatment. Knowing her patients as she does, she believes many would simply have gone without treatment. Dr. Marple agrees, “Some of these patients do not drive and have never left the county. They would never consider going to Charleston for dental care.”

Life, and the practice of dentistry, is different in a rural area. “When I practiced in Fairmont, we referred patients out who needed special attention. Here, we do not refer out for most procedures,” stated Dr. Naternicola. “Things are more basic here, and, unfortunately, I do a lot of extractions.” It is just the way of a rural population that a \$150 extraction is chosen over a \$1,500 root canal to save a tooth. Patients are just happy to have a dentist nearby when emergencies arise.

Although some of Dr. Naternicola’s patients have dental insurance, many do not, or they carry state-funded insurance through Medicaid. In turn, she has adjusted her practice to meet the needs and disposition of her patients with Medicaid, explaining that many of these patients consistently do not show up for their appointments, creating the need for her office to continually double book.



Dr. Marple agrees, “Rural dentists survive on medical card patients. It takes a certain personality to run a practice in a rural area like Braxton County.” Dr. Naternicola admits that some dentists would refuse to see patients that constantly do not show up for appointments. “It’s frustrating,” she says, “but I want to treat everyone.” Dr. Naternicola sees patients from ages 3 through 90, and she tries to accommodate all, understanding that their options are limited.

Also frustrating is that her patients typically do not come in for routine dental maintenance. “I am doing my best to change their dental habits, but for now I see a preponderance of emergencies.” On a typical day, Dr. Naternicola will see three to four emergencies and a few root canals. “If they can get here, we will see them that day,” she asserts. “Rural dentistry is never dull,” added Dr. Marple, “you never know what each day will bring.”

In addition to providing dental care to patients who would otherwise have gone without, Dr. Naternicola’s practice has had a positive economic impact on the area. For example, Dr. Marple’s six employees would have been out of work had Dr. Naternicola not been able to purchase the practice. For a low socioeconomic area such as Sutton, any number of jobs lost can have a negative impact on the local economy and need for public services. Dr. Naternicola’s practice employs one part-time and four full-time employees. Additionally, Dr. Naternicola has purchased the building, and this has enabled her to rent space to the Sutton Post Office. “They pay me rent,” she laughed.


Community leaders know that the availability of good health and dental care is a must for any town to grow and develop. Many of Dr. Naternicola’s patients travel from the surrounding counties of Gilmer, Webster and Nicholas to see her. While in town for their dental visit, many may also stop to eat, shop or buy gas, contributing to the economy of Sutton.

Dr. Naternicola herself hails from Fayetteville, listed as one of the 2006 “Top 10 Coolest Small Towns in America” by Budget Travel Magazine and as “Best River Town 2013” by Blue Ridge Outdoors magazine. She sees the same potential in Sutton, and it has motivated her to become involved in the town’s revitalization. As such, she reached out to the local middle school and started a T-shirt design contest to get students involved in promoting her dental practice while creatively expressing pride in their town.

Dr. Naternicola makes patient visits as affordable as possible. She offers a discount to those without insurance and has developed a “Compassionate Finance” program for those with special circumstances. The program is renewable annually and requires only a small monthly fee that covers two exams, two cleanings, x-rays as needed, and an emergency visit.

Dr. Marple salutes Dr. Naternicola. “It is a blessing that I turned this practice over to a younger, more ambitious individual. Patients will remain loyal to her for a long time to come.”

Dr. Naternicola would eventually like to welcome another dentist to her practice. “There is definitely room to grow here,” she observes. For now, her patients have a gem of a dentist in their community. She is patient and compassionate. “A little too much so, my staff claims,” she admits.



Two recent stories demonstrate her gentle and caring nature. "I had a 17-year-old female patient stressing out something awful about getting fillings. I took a lot of time walking her through the procedure and making her feel comfortable. Even her mom was surprised at how deliberate and patient I was with her daughter. Most importantly, they left happy and at ease, talking about how awesome the experience had been. There is a great value in positive word-of-mouth." A perfect choice of words coming from a dentist. Moreover, this special treatment is precisely what will keep patients coming back for years while continually attracting new ones.

In another case, a very sad 8-year-old girl was brought in for treatment by her grandmother. Tragically, the girl had recently lost her five-year-old brother to complications of the flu. Aware of the recent, heartbreaking circumstances, Dr. Naternicola made the little girl's visit extra special. The experience was so warm and comforting that when it was time to go home, the young girl asked if she could stay longer.

"I treat my patients with kindness and want people to know that I am a nice person. I want to help the community," shared Dr. Naternicola.

Serendipity, along with the assistance of the Center for Rural Health Development, has made a dream come true for a young dentist while continuing to ensure that an entire community and its surrounding counties have access to dental health services.



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