It's a wonderful life

Tony and Lori McLean have thriving physical therapy practice

By KELLIE FLANAGAN
Staff Writer

Settled in the Sierra with service at the center and recreation all around, it's a wonderful life for Oakhurst Physical Therapy owners Lori and Tony McLean.

They've built their thriving practice here for more than 25 years.

"We chose this community and this community chose us," Tony McLean reflected. "It's not just where we work, it's home."

When asked if they refer to the people who step through their doors as clients or patients, McLean said, "I call them neighbors."

"You treat someone's knee today and tomorrow you're cheering for them at their kid's graduation," he said. "That's rural medicine. It's deeply human."

While he's intensely passionate about being a healer, it wasn't exactly what McLean envisioned in the early years. Between the ages of 6-18 his dream was to be a ballplayer except, it turned out, he "couldn't hit a curve ball."

But his coach asked if young Tony wanted to help with athletic training. McLean did and he liked it. Later on, the mentor suggested the student would be "good in a helpful profession."

McLean is an army veteran who spent nine years as a physical therapy assistant at Fort Hood in San Antonio, Texas, and in Washington, D.C.

"I've been blessed," McLean said. "I had great mentors who said, 'go to school!'"

And that's what eventually led him to Lori and their lovely life, perhaps indirectly.

Lori's interest was sparked post high school when she volunteered in PT at Fresno Community Hospital (now Community Regional) and later got her first job at Valley Medical Center.

"I wanted to see what PT was about and Fresno state had a good program," Dr. Lori said. Both McLeans earned doctorates in physical therapy.

A match made in ... therapy

Because he'd been in the army, Tony was five years behind in the program where Lori was assigned as his "preceptor." The two paired well, though, both professionally and personally.

And the couple remains passionate about their life-affirming purpose to this day.

"Physical therapy is about more than muscles and joints," Dr. Tony said.

"It's about giving people their lives back: the ability to work, to play, to care for their families and to do the things that give them joy. These are the real outcomes. It's not just range of motion or strength scores but people living fully again."

While the McLeans began life together in the Central Valley they ultimately wanted to live in the mountains. The proximity to nature in all its green glory in the gateway communities of Eastern Madera County and Mariposa has always been a huge draw for the couple.

"Here you can finish work and take a quick hike at Lewis Creek. Or on the weekend, leave at 6:30 a.m. and be in the park with a picnic lunch and hike around Yosemite," Tony said.

They are parents to two grown sons, Phillip and Peter.

"It's a rare gift to raise your kids in a place where adventure starts at your front door," Tony added. "At night you can sneak away to see the Milky Way over Half Dome or Sentinel Dome under a full moon and sunrise over June Lake. These mountains shape you. They teach you to be strong, patient and grateful. It's important to take it in."

Lori agreed. Beyond the work it's the lifestyle they love — all four seasons.

"Yosemite in winter is so peaceful," she shared. "We like to go early to the Ahwahnee Hotel and get hot cocoa or coffee and sit and just enjoy. This place is great. For active people, it's the best kept secret."

Life happens

The McLeans married in 1992. In 1996 Phillip was born. Lori was pregnant with Peter in 1999 yet managed to complete an entrepreneurial training program offered by Fresno County in collaboration with Fresno State University.

As part of the requirement she wrote a business plan and the McLeans established Fresno Physical Therapy in January of 2000. In August that year they moved to Oakhurst.

"We first opened a little 'mom and pop' shop," Tony said. The McLeans kept both the Fresno office and their Oakhurst practice open together for five years.

"Lori ran them both."

By about 2007, they'd outgrown their original location in Oakhurst and needed more space. So they constructed the building on Sierra Way off Road 426, where Oakhurst Physical Therapy remains today.

"Tony is the visionary," said Lori.

Among his visions were those which included adding additional physical therapists to their practice. They were encouraged and inspired by doctors from whom they received referrals.

"Build it bigger than you think you want it," Tony said one surgeon advised, in the way of, "if you build it, they will come."

And they did and continue to do so.

Typically these days, the practice sees around eight to 10 patients a day. The McLeans currently employ about a dozen people including five clinicians.

"We're busy but it's not just a number coming through," Tony said of the clean, roomy practice where a low decibel of upbeat classic rock drowns out the occasional huff, puff or groan of patients — who universally feel better when they leave than when they arrived.

"It's about empowerment," said Lori. "We are educators. We want to educate you about your condition and how to manage it."

Being part of the community has never been part of the job, it's simply part of their hearts.

Over the years they've participated in Little League, Scouts and supported the Badger band program at Yosemite High School. Tony is a past-president of Sunrise Rotary in Oakhurst. The list of service goes on.

As part of their mission to educate, the McLeans invested heavily in local schools and students.

Oakhurst Physical Therapy is a past recipient of Madera County's Crystal Tower Award and the Golden Apple award for their contributions toward local education.

And the rewards are exponential.

"There's nothing more rewarding than seeing a student you mentored go on to serve others," Tony said. "It's like watching a seed grow into a forest."

McLean still goes to high school games. He said it takes some of the pressure off the coaches when it comes to evaluating potential injuries on the sideline. Sometimes, as needed, kids come by the office with a parent to make sure they're okay.

"We are here to help these athletes get stronger and prevent injury," Tony noted.

"Sports teach discipline, teamwork and confidence. If I can help keep kids safe while they learn those lessons, that's time well spent."

Direct connections

While they receive referrals from medical professionals, the community does have direct access should a situation arise. In other words, if a person has a physical problem they don't necessarily have to be referred by a doctor before coming to PT — they can often call or walk in to make an appointment.

In that case, "it is up to us with our experience to see if we are qualified to see that person or if they need help outside our scope. We evaluate, assess, educate and make a recommendation," Tony said.

"Sometimes people just need reassurance and to hear, it's okay," said Lori.

Having spent more than a quarter century in the lush foothills of the Sierra, the McLeans have made an impact just as the ancient landscape has had an impact on them.

And since mentorship has been a theme in their lives, the McLeans are looking toward the future to find others to share this Sierra dream with.

"I was fortunate to have incredible coaches and mentors," Tony said. "They showed me what was possible. Now it's my turn to pass that forward."

Anyone interested in learning more about the practice and the McLeans' plans to bring budding therapists forward is invited to contact their office.

"We want to build relationships, offer support, network and be there emotionally for the people who work for us. We want to teach you how to be at home here."

Those in pursuit of a career as physical therapists will require first a bachelor's degree and then a three-year program of intensive training to earn a doctorate.

"We enjoy teaching the next generation," Lori said. "And we want to share our love of the profession with this beautiful community. You don't have to wait to retire to move to paradise."

Oakhurst Physical Therapy is located at 39930 Sierra Way in Oakhurst. Phone (559) 683-0974 or visit www.oakhurstpt.com for information.



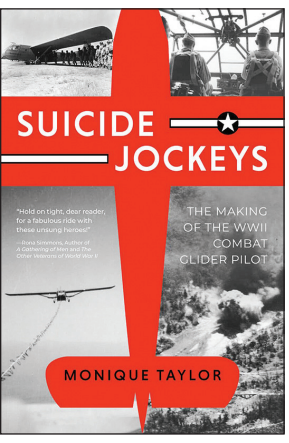
Dr. Lori McLean and Dr. Tony McClean in their Oakhurst Physical Therapy Office.


From left, the McLean family: Peter, Tony, Lori and Phillip.

Author Monique Taylor to be featured bookstore gathering

Local author Monique Taylor will present her book, "Suicide Jockeys: The Making of the WWII Combat Glider Pilot," at Raven & Pines Bookstore on Saturday, Sept. 19 at 6 p.m.

Once a college-level history instructor, Taylor lives in O'Neals. She holds a BA in English literature, an MA in history, a JD in law and is an avid researcher who focuses on little-known areas of history.



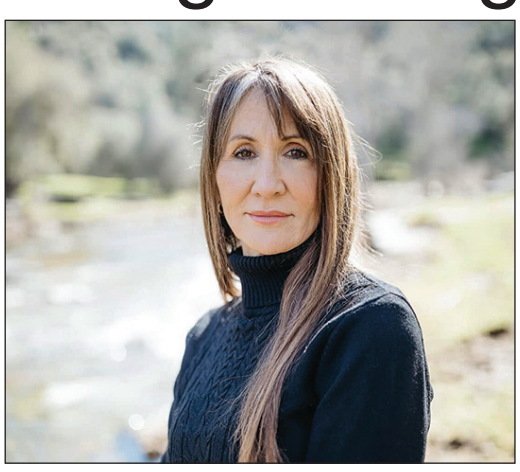
"Suicide Jockeys: The Making of the WWII Combat Glider Pilot," book cover.

Her father's stories about his time as a combat glider pilot piqued her interest in the glider program of World War II.

Exerpt:

On May 10, 1940, the Germans neutralized one of the most heavily fortified fortresses in Europe with a new weapon: the combat glider — an aerial vehicle capable of carrying men and equipment in close proximity to each other and crash landing behind enemy lines.

The Army Air Corps soon established its own glider pilot program, but the glider pilots were not considered power pilots nor infantry. The end result was a group of young men looking for adventure — belonging


Monique Taylor

seemingly to no command other than on paper — that through the course of the war went into combat with varying amounts of equipment, training, survival gear or none at all.

"Suicide Jockeys: The Making of the WWII Combat Glider Pilot" delves into the logistical, strategic and tactical use of the plane they flew. In their 'flying coffins,' these glider pilots were the independent bastards of the Army Air Corp, demonstrating sheer guts, talent, skill and luck in their missions and ultimately helping to turn the tide of the war."

Taylor has spoken publicly on numerous subjects. While not writing, Monique enjoys hiking with her husband on their ranch. Visit www.moniquetaylorauthor.com for more

Raven & Pines Bookstore is located in the Old Mill Shopping Center at 40044 Highway 49 in Oakhurst (next to Yosemite Pie Co. near Vons).

