

Career choice brought woman to town

By Sharon Corcoran

The Goodland Star-News

Some people have clear goals they work toward and achieve, while others never seem to know what they want to do with their lives.

Tracy Winchester-Hillmer started with a goal and achieved it, then her career took a turn she liked better. Now she's sitting pretty as the manager of two branches of High Plains Mental Health.

Plus, she said, the direction she took at the fork in her career road led her to her husband.

Winchester-Hillmer said she grew up in Cheyenne, Wyo., and earned a Bachelor of Science in psychology and a bachelor's degree in social work from the University of Wyoming. She earned a master's degree in social work from the University of Kansas. She had in mind being a social worker in a school, working mainly with children, but ended up deciding she would like to work with people of all ages.

But first, Hillmer worked for the St. Francis Academy, which began as a boys' home and now works with



Tracy Winchester-Hillmer, branch manager for Colby and Goodland, takes a lot of calls at High Plains Mental Health. Her job involves being a therapist, supervisor and administrator at two offices and involves tasks from assigning new clients to a therapist to calling the plumber.

Photos by Sharon Corcoran/The Goodland Star-News

families in crisis and handles foster care arrangements, among other services. Hillmer said she enjoyed working with families, but driving 1,000 miles per week got old fast.

She was offered her "dream job" at a school and, at the same time, a job as a therapist in Burlington. She took the job in Burlington because she didn't want to be limited to working with only a certain age group.

It turned out she liked the mental health field, and while in Burlington, she met and married a Goodland man, Rich Hillmer, a salesman at Finley Motors.

"I thought I wanted to work in a school," she said, "and after I got out there, I decided I'd like to work with families.

"One of the nice things about doing community mental health work is you get to work with a variety of people of different ages and situations."

After she married, a job opened at the Goodland branch of High Plains Mental Health. She thought it would be nice to not have to commute, so she applied. Hillmer started work as a therapist in the office in March 2002.

She became branch manager in February 2003.

Last August, Colby branch manager Ron Redick decided he wanted to be a full-time therapist again, and Hillmer started overseeing two branches. When Redick comes to Goodland twice a week, he is the only man in the office. The rest of the staff includes Marilyn Heffner and Rhonda Allen, secretaries; Kim Wallis and Tammy Pettijohn, case managers; and Elizabeth Hernandez and Kathleen Harris, therapists.

Redick coming over allows the branch to offer a male therapist, Hillmer said, something that has not always been available. There are more women in the field by far than men, she said.

Hillmer drives to Colby three days a week and is in Goodland the other two, unless she needs to go to the Hays office or to one of the other counties High Plains serves, which she does in emergencies.

The Goodland office covers Sherman, Cheyenne and Wallace coun-

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ties, she said, and Colby's covers Thomas, Rawlins, Logan, Gove and Sheridan. There are case managers in all the counties, she said. High Plains has been in existence 42 years, Hillmer said, and Goodland has had an office since 1974.

Hillmer said she has about 15 clients as a therapist between the two offices, but she is primarily an administrator and supervisor. A full-time therapist will average between 70 and 80 clients, she said, depending on the intensity of their needs and frequency of their appointments.

Some clients will see a therapist once a month, she said, while others come in weekly. Sometimes a client who was doing well will hit a rough patch, she said, for example after the death of a loved one.

Besides regular appointments, clients have access to services through a 24-hour hot line, Hillmer said, a service that is available to everyone in the area. The after-hours number is for anyone who has a problem, she said, and the therapists take turns on call.

"Your crisis doesn't always happen

during business hours," she said.

Hillmer said her job involves everything from supervising therapists to calling the plumber. She is the supervisor at both branches, assigns new clients to therapists, makes plans for handling emergencies and deals with the physical issues of the buildings, such as calling an electrician or plumber when needed.

She prepares information for staff meetings and holds meetings with staff at both offices by televideo conferencing. The technology also helps clients who need to meet with High Plains' psychiatrists in Hays. The first consultation cannot be done that way, Hillmer said, but follow-up appointments can, saving clients from making trips to Hays.

Sometimes work at High Plains involves noticing when a client may be a danger to himself or others and getting him into a hospital, she said.

If the client goes to a hospital willingly, Hillmer said, he can choose where to go, including several private hospitals in the area, as long as the hospital has room. If the client is not willing to go, she said, High Plains has

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Marilyn Hefner, a secretary, showed Kathleen Harris, a therapist, some information she looked up on the computer at High Plains Mental Health. The office is made up of working women, aside from a therapist who comes over from Colby twice a week.

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to file the request in district court. There is a "care and treatment" hearing, she said, and if the judge determines the client must go, he is sent to Larned State Hospital.

She said the Hillmers celebrated Easter for over a month with egg hunts around their home, thanks to their daughter, Raelyn, 2 1/2, who started a month ahead. She's still playing with her Easter eggs, Tracy Hillmer said, and has been since a month before Easter; she likes to hide them.

She also got sidewalk chalk and

bubbles for Easter, Hillmer said, and has been doing a lot of that, and she loves "Dora the Explorer." Raelyn can count to 11 in Spanish, Hillmer said, because Dora taught her.

Hillmer said she keeps up through continuing education, but has no plans to return to school full time. Hillmer said she thought about earning a doctorate degree in psychology, but not for very long.

"At school," she said, "my classmates had kids to raise, and I wondered how they did that. I was amazed by those gals — some of them looked quite tired."



Tracy Winchester-Hillmer talked to Elizabeth Hernandez, a therapist, in the High Plains Mental Health office. Although Hillmer is the boss, they aren't always talking business — many times they are telling jokes.

Mask, facial: Remove black heads easily — paint Elmer's glue on your face and peel off when dry.

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