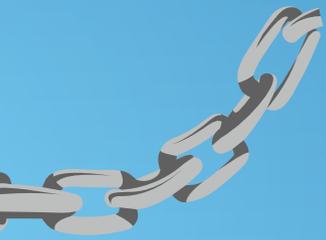


# BREAK FREE FROM THE CHAINS

FOR INDEPENDENT PHARMACISTS,  
PRACTICING FREELY IS THE  
GREATEST REWARD

by Chris Linville



**S**ome knew it quickly. Others had invested years and thought it would be a lifelong career. But they all eventually came to the same conclusion — working for a chain pharmacy was not for them.

The reasons for leaving and becoming an independent pharmacy owner boiled down to several factors. An informal survey of NCPA owner members showed that 76 percent had a desire to own a pharmacy that's a true community asset instead of an asset on a corporate spreadsheet. Another 71 percent said they wanted more freedom and opportunities to interact with patients and provide their expertise for health solutions. Sixty-seven percent wanted more control over their own destiny, and 63 percent wanted a greater sense of autonomy. Of the survey respondents, 78 percent said they worked for a chain at some point before becoming an independent owner.

According to the 2019 National Pharmacist Workforce Study from the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy (released every five years), independent pharmacists reported higher levels of job satisfaction compared to chain pharmacists (68 percent and 27 percent, respectively), and also described having more control in their work environment (50 percent to 12 percent).

“Working at an independent pharmacy is a dream come true for many chain pharmacists,” says NCPA CEO Douglas Hoey. “Most pharmacists want to be able to help patients. Independent pharmacies are known for their personal relationships with their patients. While every workplace has its challenges, independent pharmacies allow pharmacists to care for patients and provide a work-life balance needed in today’s constant ‘on’ environment.”

In this issue, we reached out to NCPA member pharmacists who made the switch, and in the following pages we share their stories.

# BETH CAVENESS



## **VILLAGE PHARMACY OF HAMPSTEAD INC. HAMPSTEAD, N.C.**

Beth Caveness decided to break from a chain and make the move toward independence in 1999.

"I was going to be paid far less at the independent, but the lifestyle change was worth it," Beth says. "At the time, my husband (Michael) and I had small children. He is a doctor, so his work life was busy too."

Before departing the chain, Beth did an exit interview and was asked why she was leaving.

"I told them that I couldn't sleep at night," she says. "I was always wondering who I killed during the day. We had three technicians and me and we would fill 400 scripts by noon. It's impossible to really know if someone shouldn't get a particular medication when you're working like that. There was no time for counseling or chatting with patients. This was before we were allowed to vaccinate, so I quit when we only filled prescriptions."

Beth says the interviewer's jaw dropped when she said how much of a pay decrease she would be taking.

"She asked why I would take a cut like that," Beth says. "I told her that peace of mind and quality of life are valuable."

Before she started at the independent, the owner basically floored her when he said of the chains, "You're a prostitute for them." Stunned that anyone would make that kind of comment, Beth asked him to clarify. "They pay you a lot so they can do whatever they want to you," he said. "Those words have stuck with me. It's true now more than ever."

Beth opened Village Pharmacy of Hampstead in 2001 when the sole independent in town closed.

"We still had the big-box store here, but no one to offer reasonable prices and excellent service," she says. "We opened Village Pharmacy to fill that gap. We feel we have been successful with helping our patients get the medication they need at prices they can afford. We also try to meet patients' needs that they don't even realize they

have. For people who forget to take their medicine, we fill pill trays. For people who need vaccines, you've come to the right place. Need a quick blood pressure check? Stop by. We can check it in minutes, as well as your pulse, your oxygen saturation, temperature, respirations. Sometimes we're a great first stop to see if you need more acute care. We love to help!"

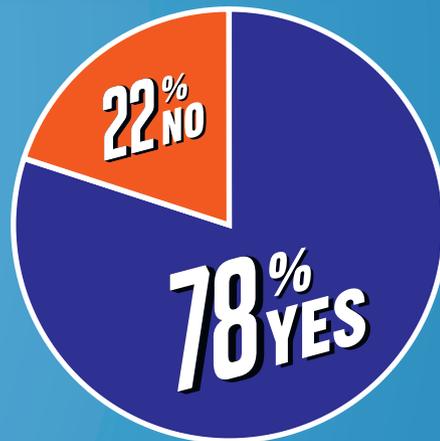


***Beth's son Christian followed her footsteps in becoming a pharmacist.***

Beth makes it clear that she would never work at a chain again.

"Thankfully, I'm sort of old enough to retire and I'd take that route before taking their abuse," she says. "The lifestyle change was huge for me and my family. I close my pharmacy for holidays and Sundays. We work short hours on Saturdays. We fill prescriptions, give vaccines, do COVID-19 and flu testing, and still feel like we know our patients and have time to talk to them. I sleep well at night, and that's huge."

**DID YOU AT SOME POINT  
WORK FOR A CHAIN PRIOR  
TO BECOMING AN  
INDEPENDENT OWNER?**



Source: NCPA survey, January 2022

**HOLDEN PHARMACY, FRANKFORT, IND.**

For Tom and Allison Holden, their pharmacy journey is a story of perseverance and overcoming adversity. Tom grew up in Brookston, Ind., where his father owned an independent pharmacy for 42 years. After Tom obtained his pharmacy degree from the Purdue University School of Pharmacy, he went to work for Revco. Allison grew up in Buies Creek, N.C., graduated from the University of North Carolina School of Pharmacy, and went to work at Kerr Drugs (a small chain in North Carolina).

Appropriately enough, they met in a drug store. A friend of the family once said, “She was selling notions and he took a notion.” As newlyweds, Tom and Allison opened Holden’s of Mulberry in August of 1988 and then Holden’s of Delphi in 1989. Things were going great until Tom was diagnosed with stage IV malignant melanoma in 1996. After being told to “Get our affairs in order” by the Mayo Clinic, they sold the stores in 1997. “Through God’s grace, I found an experimental treatment and Tom’s cancer was cured,” Allison says. In 2000, Tom went back to work for a major chain drugstore.

Tom worked at CVS until, in Allison’s words, “he turned into a guy I hardly recognized anymore — a grumpy old man!” she says.

At age 58 — “Yes 58, that is not a typo,” Allison says — Tom came home one day and told her that he wanted to open his own store.

“I told him he was crazy (more than once),” she says. “But we did it — from scratch!” The pharmacy opened in February 2016.

The reason he wanted to own his own pharmacy was simple, Allison says.

“He wanted to practice pharmacy the way it should be,” she says. “He wanted to have time to get to know and counsel his patients — he wanted to quit feeling like part of an assembly line. He also wanted to open a pharmacy in an area where people were underserved and where he could make a difference.”

**TOM AND ALLISON HOLDEN**

# RANDY SHIPP



## **RED DOOR PHARMACY AND GIFTS, HASLET, TEXAS**

For Randy Shipp, PharmD, his first job in a pharmacy was as an intern with a national chain at the end of his first year of pharmacy school. (He graduated from the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences College of Pharmacy in 2005.)

"I worked with some great pharmacists in a small town in east Texas," he says. "We had a great team and took really good care of our patients."

With that in mind, Randy decided to stay with the chain after graduation, working as a floating pharmacist in Arkansas. He then was promoted to pharmacy manager at a store in east Texas, about an hour from the town where he started. Randy increased the prescription count from 2,200 weekly to more than 4,000 in less than a year.

"That got me noticed by corporate and they started sending me all over the country to train others," he says. "I really enjoyed my job as a pharmacist but found my real passion of teaching and training. From that point I looked for more opportunities to teach and train."

Randy's next step was managing multiple stores and he soon became a district manager. He temporarily ran a district in east Texas before taking a full-time position as a district manager in west Texas. He moved to the Dallas-Fort Worth area 18 months later to help with more stores. After moving there, Randy embarked on an executive MBA program and graduated with his Master's in Business Administration two years later.

Eventually Randy says he was asked to take the next step up to a regional position, but he was not thrilled about the prospect of many nights per week on the road away from his family. He has two sons (7 and 5 at the time) and he didn't want to be away from them for long stretches.

"I declined that promotion and was then told that the company would be taking away 10 percent of my salary (metro area pay differential) and that I was capped out on pay in my current job," he says. "The company had changed and I believed that the new direction was more financially driven and less focused on people, which is how [the founder] started it. I felt like

this was the push I needed to do what I had always wanted to do anyway, and that was opening my own pharmacy."

Randy says that his mentor from his first pharmacy job as an intern had opened his own pharmacy from scratch, which motivated him even more, so he began his due diligence and created a plan for his own store. Needless to say, he has no regrets.

"Here we are five years later with a successful pharmacy, and one where I get to work with my patients as much as I want without someone looking over my shoulder," he says. "I love being able to wake up at 4 a.m. with some crazy idea and put it right to work that day. There's no corporate oversight [above me] to question ideas to the point of extinction. I know my patients by name and they know me and my family. My kids walked to Sonic (about 200 yards from the pharmacy) for lunch one day last summer and my wife and I both got calls from patients asking if we knew the boys were at Sonic!"

Randy enjoys the time he has with his sons, spending time with his patients, being at home with his wife Katy every night, working with people who are like-minded, and managing a business that allows him to be financially successful as his ideas and interest grow.

"What more could someone ask for?" he says.

# DENNIS CZERW

## **PARKWAY PHARMACY, PHILADELPHIA**

Dennis Czerw, owner of Parkway Pharmacy in Philadelphia, says, "I always knew that independent pharmacy was the place for me because I value the personal touch that a small business provides. And being that accessible health care provider that folks seek out is very rewarding."

Dennis previously worked in a variety of roles for CVS from 2011-17, including pharmacy manager. He says of his time there, "It's a cliché, but at CVS

you will always just be a number — as a patient or an employee."

Dennis' passion for independent pharmacy is such that not even a pandemic stopped him. He became owner in August 2020 and has administered more than 20,000 vaccines since. The location has had a pharmacy for more than 40 years and Dennis is the third owner. He had worked there previously as an employee for more than a decade.

"Opening this business in the turbulent times that independent pharmacy is dealing with and adding COVID-19 on top of it has been the hardest yet most rewarding period of my career," he says.

## **HOWARD'S PHARMACY, SIMPSONVILLE, S.C., AND FOUNTAIN INN, S.C.**

Scott and Deb Causey became interested in pharmacy while attending high school together. After graduating from the Medical University of South Carolina College of Pharmacy in 1997, they decided to work for a large chain pharmacy, and both worked for CVS (originally Revco) for more than 15 years.



"We both decided to leave CVS due to the stressful environment and undue pressure to always do more with less, and feeling underappreciated," Scott says.

Their true passion became reality in 2014 when they were given the opportunity to own Howard's Pharmacy in Simpsonville, S.C. The pharmacy was started by Deb's great uncle, Dr. Fred Howard, in 1934. They have since opened a second location in Fountain Inn, S.C.

"I had always wanted to own my own pharmacy, but the timing was never right," Scott says. "It's just been great because of that customer-oriented feel and touch we have with our customers. I'm doing what I've always dreamed about doing."

Scott does acknowledge that working in the chain environment gave him and Deb the experience and knowledge needed to run a business, but doing it on their own terms gives them more satisfaction.

"We now have time to talk with and counsel patients and give them the quality of care they deserve, instead of being micromanaged and stressing over getting behind in the workflow," Scott says. "We have been blessed to work with a great pharmacy staff and now have the opportunity to give the best pharmaceutical care possible."

# SCOTT AND DEB CAUSEY

**WHAT WERE YOU SEEKING WHEN YOU CHOSE TO LEAVE THE CHAIN ENVIRONMENT AND BECOME AN INDEPENDENT OWNER?**

<b>63%</b>	<b>Greater autonomy</b>
<b>67%</b>	<b>Control over your own destiny</b>
<b>71%</b>	<b>More freedom and opportunities to interact with patients and provide your expertise for health solutions</b>
<b>55%</b>	<b>Freedom to design and create clinical options, initiatives, and opportunities for better patient outcomes</b>
<b>76%</b>	<b>The desire to own a pharmacy that's a true community asset instead of an asset on a corporate spreadsheet</b>
<b>19%</b>	<b>Other</b>

Source: NCPA survey, January 2022

**MCHUGH PHARMACY GROUP  
MULTIPLE LOCATIONS IN THE SOUTHEAST**

Kyle McHugh's chain career with Revco/CVS spanned the ages 16 to 32, starting as a stock boy and becoming a district manager before leaving. Eventually Kyle said he couldn't support the stores under his responsibility due to continuous budget cuts and believed he could do it better by himself.

"My wife (Pame) and I own 12 stores now and wouldn't change a thing," he says.

In the early 2000s, Kyle knew he was ready for a change.

"I had gone through the whole corporate rat race, I had moved all over the Southeast for them, done everything they asked, and they never did anything

for me, it was just for them," he says. "We had always talked about opening a store, and the opportunity came up to get into some stores that were already running so I could learn before I actually jumped in and did it myself. That was very appealing to us."

Kyle bought his first independent pharmacies in 2003, and has continued to grow since, with stores in Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina. He and Pame, also a pharmacist, are co-owners of nine of the pharmacies, and they have another partner with the other three.

When asked for advice to others who might be interested in making the jump from a chain to independent ownership, Kyle says learning as much as possible about the business side is critical, and mentions NCPA's

Pharmacy Ownership Workshops and Enhanced Services Boot Camps as ideal resources. He suggests a junior/minority partnership as a good way to get a feel for how an independent operates.

"The bottom line is that you have to work hard, you have to pay attention to the numbers, and you have to hire good people," Kyle says. "If you do those three things, you are going to be successful."



**KYLE MCHUGH**

# SHELLY LEWIS

## **COMMUNITY PHARMACY OF GREENEVILLE, GREENEVILLE, TENN.**

It's safe to say Shelly Lewis' pharmacy career didn't get off to the best start, and she realized it quickly. After graduating from pharmacy school in January 1999, she accepted a position with CVS. In February she had her first child, in March took her board exam, and started working as soon as she received her passing results.

"I worked the night shift so I could be home with my infant during the day," Shelly says. "Those were some tough days. As a new pharmacist this was a terrible decision for me. The chaotic, fast-paced environment was just awful. I formed very few relationships with my patients. I thought, 'How am I even helping these people?'"

A few years later Shelly had her second child and moved on to Rite Aid in another state. The location was along the border of two states, so she obtained two new pharmacy licenses. She stayed with Rite Aid for eight years, and it was there that she finally believed that she could make a difference in her patients' lives.

"I preferred the slower stores so I could spend more time with patients," Shelly says. "I learned a lot about the business side of things also. I was so eager to learn all that I could. But I felt that there was still so much holding me back from what I could offer my patients, being in this corporate, controlled setting. There were just so many rules that I felt hindered the way that I could take care of people."

Eventually Shelly took a transfer with Rite Aid and moved to Tennessee. The new job was about 45 minutes away from her hometown. After a few years she decided to work for a Walgreens just a few minutes from home.



"I worked in a 24-hour store that was the busiest in the district," she says. "I tried so hard to make a difference. I found that if I spoke with my patients for more than a minute, I would cause such a backup in the pharmacy. The technicians were so busy they would avoid the ringing phones. I would answer them a lot but would find myself getting backed up again. It was a vicious cycle day in and day out. I will never forget the sight of the bar graph at the top of my computer screen: red-yellow-green. It was a race to stay out of the red. That is not what I envisioned for my pharmacy career."

Once again Shelly found herself in an environment where she didn't think she could make a difference. A year later she found herself answering an ad at a small hometown independent pharmacy. It was a decision that changed her life.

"It was there that I found my calling and also decided that my next step was to work on building the best independent pharmacy that my town had ever seen," Shelly says. "I would be there for my community when none of the other pharmacies would."

# GREG DEESE



## **OAKHURST PHARMACY, CHARLOTTE, N.C.**

Greg Deese is owner of Oakhurst Pharmacy, in Charlotte, N.C., where the motto is, “We are rooted in the community.” It is located near his old childhood neighborhood.

However, before becoming completely rooted, Greg spent more than 30 years steadily climbing the ladder in chain pharmacy. He graduated with his pharmacy degree from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1983. By that point he had already been working for Revco for two years as an intern. Greg was hired full time as a staff pharmacist after graduation, and by 1990 he had been promoted by Revco as a pharmacy supervisor, covering 60 stores, with responsibilities including pharmacy operations and staffing.

In 2001, after Revco had been acquired by CVS, Greg was tabbed as regional sales manager for 150 stores covering Maryland, West Virginia, Delaware, and southern Pennsylvania. This entailed all facets of the region including front-end sales and operations, pharmacy sales, prescriptions and operations, profits, real estate (new store identification, relocation of stores, closing of stores, acquisition of independents), asset protection, human resources, and talent development.

Greg had 35 regional direct reports and more than 3,500 store employees under his regional umbrella.

Another move upward happened in 2003, when he was promoted as regional sales manager over the Washington, D.C. market for CVS (it was the No. 1 market share for the company, including \$1.3 billion in sales in 175 stores). “It was arguably the toughest market in the company to operate,” Greg says.

In 2011 Greg accepted a position as a Rite Aid as regional vice president, covering 350 stores across four states, with \$1.4 billion in sales.

Then in 2019, Greg says he “decided to return to my roots as a pharmacist in the Carolinas,” opening his first independent as a co-owner in rural North Carolina. The next year he opened Oakhurst Pharmacy (he is the sole owner). He says the site is within two miles of everything from his youth and early professional career as a pharmacist — original home, elementary and middle schools, church, prior jobs before his pharmacy career, and the Revco where he was hired as an intern.

“The bottom line is I turned down the opportunity to continue at Rite Aid along with working at Walgreens in 2018 when Walgreens acquired the Rite Aids in the South, and instead decided to open my own pharmacies,” Greg says. “I missed the patient interaction, the ability to make decisions for the betterment of patient outcomes, and to be a part of the community.”

It’s a cliché, but for Greg, home is really where the heart is.

“I decided to return to where my love of pharmacy began, as a community pharmacist specializing in patient care,” he says. “My goal is simple – serve the Oakhurst community by providing superior health care in a local business setting.”



**CATONSVILLE PHARMACY,  
PARADISE PROFESSIONAL PHARMACY  
CATONSVILLE, MD.**

When asked to describe her pharmacy path, Dixie Leikach says jokingly, "It's kind of a long story."

While in pre-pharmacy at Salisbury University in Salisbury, Md., Dixie says her mentor, Sharon Allman, helped her apply for a Maryland Pharmacists Association scholarship. She was awarded the scholarship and thinks that's the only reason she was accepted into pharmacy school at the University of Maryland at Baltimore. Dixie continued to work for Rite Aid through school and after graduation in 1992. Her now-husband Neil worked for an independent pharmacy at the time.

After Dixie and Neil had their first son, she left Rite Aid and worked for another chain. It did mostly specialty and long-term care, but she worked in one

of its two community locations. She then moved to NeighborCare, a small chain in Baltimore.

"When Neil and I opened our first store and needed to pay our bills, I went from part-time to full-time with NeighborCare," Dixie says. "After two years I left the chain world and we opened our second store location. I haven't looked back."

It was a different career path from what Dixie had originally planned after graduating from pharmacy school. At the time, she thought she would be a "top dog" at Rite Aid and looked forward to moving up the ranks. Dixie worked closely with her supervisor at a store as a supervisor in training. While on bed rest with her first child, Dixie monitored "my store" through a remodel and attended the new computer system training. She even brought a sleeping bag to lie on her left side during breaks. However, things changed.

"Right before I came back to work from maternity leave, they moved me to a new store and also changed my supervisor," Dixie says. "We had apparently gotten too close. It was finally clear that they didn't have my best interest at heart."

As it turned out, things worked out for the best.

"Neil and I are proud of the fact that we can practice pharmacy the way we were trained to and the way he saw his father, Henry, operate his store," Dixie says. "We have mentored other new graduates that became pharmacy owners and continue to spread the word that pharmacy ownership is a viable option after graduation. I am fortunate to have this life and thank independent pharmacy for it every day."

**NCPA OWNERSHIP  
WORKSHOP CAN  
HELP OWNERSHIP  
DREAMS COME TRUE**

Maybe you've talked about it: owning your own pharmacy someday, but you're not sure you have the skills or the resources. Or maybe you've been running your own pharmacy for a little while and you're ready to take it to the next level. In either case, the NCPA Innovation Center offers a proven resource just for you: The Pharmacy Ownership Workshop, sponsored by McKesson and in part by Live Oak Bank and Pharmacists Mutual Companies. Check out [ncpa.org/ow](http://ncpa.org/ow) to find out more.