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# PHYSICIAN LOVES ADVOCATING FOR WOMEN & DELIVERING *'Miracles'*

By Tanya Manus  
Tumbleweed Photography

Thousands of women in the Black Hills can be grateful Dr. Rochelle Christensen doesn't take no for an answer.

Rochelle, a Board Certified OB-GYN, knew from an early age she wanted to be a doctor – specifically, a cardiac surgeon. In high school, a guidance counselor discouraged her ambitions, particularly since she was female, and advised her to pick a more “realistic” career. His words only made Rochelle more determined. She became a physician and surgeon who blazed a new trail for women in the Black Hills. Rochelle was the first female OB-GYN to open a practice here.



"I always wanted to make a positive difference for others. I love being an advocate for women," said Rochelle, who has cared for thousands of women and their babies since opening her practice in 1997. "I just want to make someone else's life better. That's my goal."

Being an OB-GYN and a pioneer in South Dakota's medical community was not part of Rochelle's original career path. Fortunately, her lifelong willingness to try new things led her to the Black Hills.

Growing up on a farm near the tiny town of Wabasso, Minnesota, Rochelle and her family didn't have much money. However, she had many opportunities to learn and excel. "In high school I was involved in every activity available - choir, band, twirling, cheerleading, sports. I was valedictorian of my class at Wabasso High School," Rochelle said.

Her parents were supportive of her activities and her dream to become a physician. Rochelle attended South Dakota State University and met her husband while the two were in the SDSU Pride marching band. Rochelle graduated from Creighton University in 1993. During her residency at Creighton, her career path turned from cardiac surgery to obstetrics and gynecology. "My chief resident was amazing. He talked me into delivering babies and I'm glad he did. I love what I do," Rochelle said. Rochelle completed her residency in Obstetrics/Gynecology at University of Nebraska Medical Center in 1997.

Rochelle married Jens Christensen while she was in medical school. After graduating, she agreed to move to her husband's favorite place in the world - Rapid City, South Dakota - for six months. Rochelle quickly realized Rapid City was a community that needed her.

"My first patient in Rapid City was a lady who had waited three months to see me because she heard a female physician was coming. She complained of a 'washing machine sound' in her head," Rochelle said.

The patient needed an emergency hysterectomy. The sound she heard



Top left: Dance minor at SDSU. Performed in "Capers" as a solid gold dancer. Top right: Advocating for women's health care with the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. Dr. Christensen was recently elected Chairman of the SD Section of ACOG. Middle: Rochelle, Jens, Jan (mom), Ralph (dad), Ralph Jr. (brother), Jennifer (sister), Christina (sister). Bottom: Family photo





was a heart murmur caused by her heart working so hard to keep her alive. "When she gave me a dream catcher after surgery because she was so thankful...I knew right then that Rapid City was the place for our family," Rochelle said.

Nineteen years later, Rochelle is grateful for her patients and her staff who support her in providing exceptional patient care. "Surround yourself with talent, compassion and motivation, and there will be success," she said. "This is what I've done, and we have a dream team at the clinic."

Rochelle is looking forward to seeing a professional dream come true this year: She wants to deliver two generations of babies. One of the babies Rochelle delivered is now an adult who's pregnant, and Rochelle is excited about helping bring that baby into the world. "She better not deliver when I'm out of town," Rochelle said, laughing.

"I always say I have the best job in the world. When things get stressful, I can go deliver a baby - a miracle," Rochelle said.

As she's built her practice, she's become an advocate for women locally and statewide. Rochelle serves as South Dakota Chairman of the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology. She recently returned from Washington, D.C., where she advocated for women who suffer from addictions and postpartum issues.

"I see how women sometimes are treated and I believe we take a little bit of a backseat," Rochelle said. "My mother was an advocate for me and helped me get where I am. I want to do that for other people who might need a little help."

Outside of work, family is Rochelle's focus. She and her husband have three children - Colette, 20, Chelsey, 17, and Jens, 15. As a working mother with an unpredictable schedule, she credits her husband for his outstanding support.

"My husband has been a big help. He covers for me with family, work, and housework. When the kids were little,



Top left: Met husband, Jens Christensen, in the "Pride of the Dakota" at SDSU. Top right: In 4th grade, Rochelle helped write a song for Hank Aaron who held the Major League record for the most home runs in baseball. Hank Aaron visited and signed a baseball. Middle: The girls, Chelsey, Rochelle, and Colette



I wouldn't see them sometimes for days (when I was on call). My husband would bring them to the office. They'd hide in my office and surprise me. I liked that," Rochelle said, smiling. Family time is cherished.

"Sports are something our family likes doing together. We like photography...probably our favorite is photographing the Badlands and Spearfish," Rochelle said. "We like being at home together too, watching movies. There's always laughter and fun. We all get along well."

One of her family's now-favorite jokes: "My favorite thing to say is 'Let's head out, like a baby.' The kids used to get annoyed by this. Now that they're more mature, they smile," Rochelle said.

Rochelle is especially proud that all three of her children excel in gymnastics and track. They've each set records or are ranked nationally. But above all other accomplishments, she wants her children to have excellent character, and to follow in her footsteps of helping others.

"I teach them to be strong, to be pioneers, and to use their talents. I also teach them to be kind and humble. Even when other kids are mean, you stay kind and humble," Rochelle said. "I want to be a good example to my kids. I want to show them that life isn't about themselves."



## THINGS YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT DR. ROCHELLE CHRISTENSEN

Top left: Daughter Chelsey placing 4th All-Around at JO National Gymnastics Championships in 2015.  
 Top right: Meeting Nicolas Cage on the scene of National Treasure 2. We were all "extras".  
 Middle left: Daughter Colette winning the JO National Track Championship Titles in both triple jump and high jump in 2012. Chelsey won 6th in the triple jump at that same Nationals meet.  
 Middle right: Son Jens qualified for Future Stars JO National Championships in 2011.  
 Bottom: Surrounded by this amazing, caring team at Rapid City OB/GN. Sharron Bramblee, PA, CNP; Eva Lazarus; Samantha Pechota, LPN; Kim Holzer, RDMS, RT; Kate Kearney, LPN; Dr. Christensen; Wendy Gooding; Penny Stands, LPN; Joanne Evans-Lewis, WHNP-BC; Kari Simonson

- 1.** She minored in dance in college, a random choice that also led to her role as a "Solid Gold Dancer" in Capers, SDSU's student talent show.
- 2.** She played the bassoon, piccolo, flute, and clarinet in high school. She'd eventually like to play the bassoon with the Black Hills Symphony.
- 3.** In the fourth grade, she met Hank Aaron after she helped write a song for him. Her teacher recorded the song and sent it to Aaron. Christensen met the baseball legend when he visited a nearby town. He gave her a baseball autographed to her, which she still has.
- 4.** She's no stranger to movie sets. "I slipped into the 'Hidalgo' set, met Viggo Mortensen, and got my 'Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron' DVD signed by writer-producer John Fusco," Christensen said. Later, she was an "extra" in the final scene of "National Treasure 2: Book of Secrets." She played a tourist at Mount Rushmore.
- 5.** She was on the diving and swimming teams at South Dakota State University, after being a self-taught lifeguard in high school.