

HOLLY'S HEALTH MART • *Prescott, Arkansas*

NCPA's government affairs motto is "Get into Politics or Get Out of Pharmacy." It's a phrase Mike and Holly Ross take literally. They are into politics, and most certainly not out of pharmacy.

Mike Ross is a third-term Democrat in the U.S. House of Representatives, representing the Fourth District of Arkansas.

Meanwhile, Holly Ross, PD, is co-owner (with Mike) of Holly's Health Mart and Home Medical Equipment in Prescott, Arkansas. The business, which they acquired in 1993, includes a pharmacy, a home medical equipment showroom, and a gift shop. As with any successful business, Holly says she tries to go the extra mile.

"We do everything possible to let our customers know we are there for them," she says. "We make home deliveries, and we have after-hours availability, which is something our customers really appreciate. We generally hear the

most compliments on our DME (durable medical equipment) delivery service. We have a wonderful staff that truly goes above and beyond for the patients' needs. They do everything they can to put themselves in the patients' shoes."

Holly and Mike know firsthand that it is an era of uncertainty for many independent pharmacists, with issues such as Medicare Part D, Medicaid changes, and pressures from pharmacy benefit managers weighing heavily on their minds. Mike, a strong supporter of NCPA's legislative efforts, says that as a pharmacy owner, he understands the concerns of his colleagues. As an elected official, his goal is to help make a positive difference.

"I think my experience as the owner of a family pharmacy helps me to understand the challenges faced by a pharmacy and most other small businesses in our country," he says. "I

U.S. Congress, we also understand the laws that affect changes in the industry,” she says. “I believe that it’s important for all who rely upon their community pharmacists to be as mindful as possible about proposed laws and how they could be affected. For instance, most Americans were not familiar with the recent changes to Medicare until it impacted them.”

Holly and Mike first met as college students in the early 1980s. They were both 21 when they married in July 1983, shortly before she received her Bachelor of Science degree from Ouachita Baptist University in Arkadelphia, Arkansas. After a stint as a general science teacher, she and Mike moved to Little Rock, where he received his degree from the University of Arkansas. Holly noticed that there was a heavy demand for pharmacists in the area, and Mike encouraged her to visit Gary Lewis, a pharmacist and friend of Mike’s since childhood. She then decided to pursue a career in the field and graduated from the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences School of Pharmacy in 1988.

In 1989, Holly, Mike, and newborn daughter Sidney (a son, Alex, was born in 1992) moved to his hometown of Prescott, a community of some 4,000 in the southwest part of the state. That same year, Mike was first elected to the Arkansas Senate, where he would serve for 10 years. A career in the legislative arena had been on his radar screen for

a while, dating back to when a young state governor from the nearby town of Hope was seeking a political comeback.

“I was former Gov. Bill Clinton’s driver when I was 21 and he was 34,” Mike says. “He had already been governor for one term (1979-81) and had been defeated by Gov. Frank White. It was historic, because he had recently been defeated and was traveling the state asking people to give him a second chance. It was through my travels with him

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and I oversee the gift shop and work about two days a week as a pharmacist. I'm always on call for our patients and customers. As any successful business owner knows—the customer always comes first.”

Interestingly, years earlier Mike had helped Lewis buy his own pharmacy, after hearing the owner express his desire to sell.

Mike was first elected to Congress in 2000, and his duties in Washington and throughout his district limit his time at the pharmacy, but he says he enjoys interacting with local citizens when he's in town.

“When I am home, I always see a friendly face, and I love to listen to folks from my hometown about the issues that I am dealing with in Washington and how the decisions we make impact them and their everyday lives,” he says. “Perhaps the best poll I've found is going home and visiting with folks at our family pharmacy to learn where people really are on issues.”

Among those issues are Medicare Part D and Medicaid.

“They are a huge part of any pharmacy's business, and how these programs are implemented will have a direct impact on how many family pharmacies survive the many changes that we are seeing in the profession,” Mike says. “I do not believe pharmacies have received a fair shake in recent

years, and that is why it is so important for pharmacists to get involved. I believe that we need ‘common sense’ reforms to Medicare Part D and to Medicaid—without them, we will lose many family pharmacies, especially those in rural areas, and the quality of care to our patients will suffer.”

Mike says that with many different groups and interests vying for his attention, it's important for pharmacists to effectively educate their elected officials on the issues.

“Invite them to spend a day working in your pharmacy,” he says. “Invite them to host a town hall meeting on Medicare Part D and other seniors' issues in your pharmacy. These experiences will be invaluable for you and your member of Congress.”

Holly agrees strongly with her husband that staying engaged politically is crucial for the long-term health of independent community pharmacy.

“Caring for the customers' needs is always most important,” she says. “I believe that pharmacists need a voice in Washington that understands the industry.”

And as for the NCPA motto, Mike says, “I think that sums it up pretty well.”