SAPULPA â€” Marked by medical school, a residency and physicianâ€™s practice, much of Heidi Dickensâ€™ adult life has been tied to tenets of the Hippocratic oath. Now, she swears by a new career â€” that of a cashmere goat rancher. â€œThe one thing you learn going through medical school is that you end up teaching yourself most of the knowledge you learn,â€• Dickens says. â€œThink about it; if you can teach yourself to be a doctor, you can teach yourself to be anything.â€• And she has. In about four short years, Dickens she has gone from livestock neophyte to cashmere connoisseur, with her animals producing some of the most sought-after fibers on the globe at a 240-acre ranch outside Sapulpa. Two years ago, she entered into an exclusive wholesale partnership with Loops, a Tulsa yarn store. â€œIt was like Christmas morning when I found out that the biggest cashmere ranch in America was in Oklahoma only 10 minutes from me,â€• says Shelley Brander, founder and CEO of Loops. â€œI know a fair amount about certain breeds, but it was a surprise to me that cashmere goats can actually thrive in this area and that it is their ideal atmosphere. I had always thought of Mongolia and Kashmir, thinking they would be happier up in the mountains in the cold.â€• Seeking to stock a family farm in 2015, Heidi and her husband, Gene Dickens, initially bought animals such as horses and llamas on Craigslist, she said. Not long afterward, she took to the road to bolster the inventory, bringing back five cashmere goats from Texas in a mini-van. The goat herd now has ballooned to about 150, she says. â€œThe depth that Heidi dove into it â€” having her medical background â€” to really understanding the breeding process and learning about different kinds of breeds, including bringing a stud from the other side of the world, is pretty incredible.â€• Brander says. â€œThe cashmere on the world market has gotten more and more degraded and more and more suspect on the purity. Itâ€™s really great to have a source that cares about that and to know where itâ€™s coming from.â€• â€˜It was kind of nutsâ€™ Heidi,

who specialized in internal medicine, and Gene, a general surgeon in Tulsa, met in the gross anatomy lab at the University of Oklahoma College of Medicine. Both ended up as Tulsa physicians, enduring double-duty as caregivers and parents. â€œWhen Gene got out of his residency, then thingâ€™s got really real,â€• Heidi says. â€œWe were both on call and we had three little kids under the age of 5. It was kind of nuts. It was a little too stressful.â€• Seeking to reduce her 60-hour work weeks, Heidi segued to an oncology clinic in McAlester, where she stayed until about 2006, later taking a job for a few months at a sleep medicine practice in Tulsa. She has retired her medical license but maintains a rental business she started about nine years ago. â€œWhen I stopped my practice, it just de-stressed our lives because both of us were worrying about who was going to do this if something happened with the kids,â€• she says. â€œIt was always on your mind. When I didnâ€™t have my full-time practice, neither one of us was worried about that, even though my parents were there and taking care of the kids and stuff. You can either have mommy guilt or educational guilt. I can take educational guilt a whole lot easier. â€œFor me, working as a physician was a job. I can do a lot of jobs and be happy doing that. It doesnâ€™t complete me as a person. But my husband, I could tell when he would come home from work. It just was what he was made to do.â€•

While Gene kept his scalpel, his wife carved out a new livelihood, applying her scientific curiosity to agriculture. â€œWe both have in common this quest for knowledge and understanding things,â€• he says. â€œIâ€™m more of a hands-on person. Sheâ€™s more of a reader. Iâ€™ve read more agriculture books in the past five years than medical books because sheâ€™s made me. And sheâ€™s read 10 times more than me. â€œItâ€™s easy to fall in love with the land and animals if you like that thing.

They are just pure, not so much full of drama like we have in

the human world. For my wife, sheâ€™s an eternal mother at the end of the day, despite all her degrees. She likes taking care of things and problem solving.â€• Splitting hairs Cashmere goats have two layers of hair, guard hairs that grow year-round and an insulating, ultra-soft cashmere undercoat that is shed in the spring. Each fiber needs to be less than 19 microns in diameter to be labeled cashmere; by contrast, a human hair is in the 50- to 80-micron range, Heidi Dickens says. â€œThe lower the micron count, the softer it can be,â€• she says. Cashmere fleece can be woven into lavish, durable garments and scarves that, according to Heidi, are seven times warmer than wool. The problem, however, lies with the limited supply. After its down is stripped of contaminants such as grease, dirt and hay, a typical cashmere goat produces only four ounces of usable fiber, which is harvested once a year, she says. A sheep, on the other hand, might produce eight pounds of usable wool. She packs her cashmere in trash bags and mails it to a mill to be processed, a fee that runs about $100 per pound, five times the cost for wool. From her 150 goats, about 45 pounds of sheared and brushed fiber are collected annually, a harvest that last year yielded 200 skeins of yarn, Dickens says. â€œFor us, as small producers, what is cost-prohibitive is the processing,â€• she says. Another revenue stream? Derived from the name Kashmir, a region of the northwestern Indian subcontinent, cashmere originally was produced as far back as the 13th century. Many of the worldâ€™s goats that produce this fiber reside in the Himalayas, where the freezing climate induces a thick fleece. But cashmere also can be grown in places such as Australia, where the forageable land and climate is similar to Oklahomaâ€™s. Down Under, ranchers are breeding for goats to â€œproduce a pound of cashmere versus four ounces,â€• Dickens says. Two years ago, she imported semen from Australian and New Zealand lines for use with her herd. â€œThatâ€™s what the Australians have proved,â€• Dickens says. â€œThey donâ€™t need this bitter cold climate to produce their cashmere. Genetics

will dictate that.â€• Down the road, she would like to expand her operation in the name of sustainable agriculture for the state, giving ranchers the option to raise her goats in exchange for Dickensâ€™ buying the fiber. â€œMy passion would be that small farms in Oklahoma and around the U.S. could buy breeding stock from me to add another revenue stream to their farm, to utilize land they are already using and processes they already have in place,â€• she says. â€œSo they can raise them for milk, meat or fiber â€” or all three.â€• Featured video Rhett Morgan 918-581-8395 rhett.morgan@tulsaworld.com Twitter: @RhettMorganTW Subscribe to Daily Headlines Sign up! * I u agree that registration on or use of this site constitutes agreement to its user agreement and privacy policy. The business news you need Get the latest local business news delivered FREE to your inbox weekly. Sign up! * I understand and agree that registration on or use of this site constitutes agreement to its user agreement and privacy policy.