“Medical students are bright, curious, and eager to learn,” said Dr. William Brennan, Asst. Medical Director at Spring Harbor Hospital. He enjoys teaching students about psychiatry because it’s all about the clinical encounter. “I model the conversation I have with a patient to demonstrate how to establish rapport and get their story.”

Recently selected by Tufts University School of Medicine (TUSM) as a faculty member to be recognized for Accomplished Teaching in the Psychiatry Clerkship at Maine Medical Center during 2015-2016, Dr. Brennan has been teaching third and fourth-year medical students for more than a decade. He explains his approach as helping students understand how to get inside the patient’s head.

“Psychiatry can be challenging and emotionally draining. You have to have good boundaries. But it puts your own life in perspective when you meet people living in a shelter disowned by their family. Relatively speaking, you feel fortunate.”

Dr. Brennan’s expertise is schizophrenia and he is fascinated by the study of people. “It helps to have a thick skin. Even though encounters can be adversarial, the people you see appreciate the humanity.” He describes human behavior as the last frontier in medicine. Even though medicine is fairly mature, the opportunities in psychiatry are still wide open.

Today there are more students coming through rotations doing a third year psychiatry clerkship than ever before, which is good news for mental healthcare in Maine where only 35% of the need is met, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation (health professional shortage areas as of January 1, 2017).

Students stay at Spring Harbor for three weeks before moving to Maine Medical Center for three weeks. “Spring Harbor is an exceptional training environment with a wide variety of patients and levels of acuity. Students see everything here,” explained Dr. Brennan. Maine Medical Center, on the other hand, is more specialized with Emergency Department and geriatric psychiatry patients.

“I once met a surgeon who said that psychiatry and surgery were the most invasive specialties; surgeons use scalpels to uncover what’s on the inside, psychiatrists use their questions.”

This is Dr. Brennan’s second career. He decided to go to medical school at age 38 and found a passion for psychiatry. With a Phd in biochemistry, he had the science background of a critical thinker and the ability to condense different types of information succinctly. This has been instrumental as a clinician trying to make a diagnosis.

“I once met a surgeon who said that psychiatry and surgery were the most invasive specialties; surgeons use scalpels to uncover what’s on the inside, psychiatrists use their questions. No two patients are alike. With every encounter with a patient, you are editing yourself and changing your approach.”

As the Tufts University awardee, Dr. Brennan is recognized by his students for excellence in teaching, and as an outstanding role model. His exemplary leadership is something he does, not for recognition, but for pure passion of psychiatry. As he describes his teaching role: “If I didn’t have students, it wouldn’t be this much fun.”