

Dr. SuzAnne Palmer, M.D.

By Catherine Dean

After 35 years of serving women in her chosen field of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Dr SuzAnne Palmer is retiring in late September of this year.

When she arrived in 1983, Palmer was the first female physician to have a private practice in Milledgeville. She joined Drs. Goodrich, Veal, and Cardoso in private practice at Milledgeville ObGyn Associates.

Palmer stresses she never felt barriers in her profession from being a woman and knew instantly that she was accepted in town.

“I came to Milledgeville straight from my residency,” said Palmer. “I was truly embraced by my practice, patients, and the community-the reception was simply wonderful. I remember getting busy very fast,”

She does remember the nurses at Oconee Regional Medical Center (ORMC) being concerned for her when she first arrived. They were worried about her being such a small female working with the big, strong men in the practice. She laughs when adding, “After getting to know me over the first six months, they told me they no longer had any concerns.”

Palmer’s warm reception was enhanced by the love she developed for her newly adopted town. She found Milledgeville to be quaint and charming and has never considered leaving it for bigger sites.

“I would have died a slow death in a big city,” she explains. “I love going to the grocery store or dry cleaners and everyone knows me and speaks. It is great to see the children I’ve delivered grow up and witness their lives as they unfold.”

Choosing the Right Path

Palmer grew up in Venice, Florida, which at that time was considered a small town. She has always felt more at home in smaller communities and says she would never consider living in a large city.

She credits her elementary school teachers with instilling her with a belief in herself and a love of learning. She spent her free time in junior high volunteering as a candy striper at a local hospital.

Although she never considered herself a gifted student because she had to study diligently, she gave the salutatory address at her high school graduation. She told fellow students to set goals high, higher than what they thought they could achieve.

“As I reflect on the past decades, that advice has withstood the test of time,” she noted.

Palmer entered college at the University of Florida (UOF) as a nursing major. Coming from a small town, she said a campus with 25,000 students was terrifying. She struggled with self-doubt and thinking she would not “measure up”.

Her freshman year consisted of relentless studying and little socializing. After surviving her first year and thriving in the academic environment, she changed her major to the pre-med curriculum. She graduated with a degree in Chemistry and entered the University of Florida College of Medicine.

“The four years of medical school at the University of Florida are the most blurred of my educational journey,” said Palmer. “The time commitment was so total that it seemed my only breaks were when I was sleeping, eating, or bathing.”

After graduating medical school, she began her obstetrics and gynecology residency-training program in Charleston, South Carolina. She recalls many 36 hour stretches on labor and delivery when her head never hit a pillow.

“It was at this level of education that I gained an understanding of the tremendous rewards as well as the utter devastation that I would encounter in patient care,” she said.

One of the achievements she is most proud of is earning board certification. In her field, this requires creating a case list of all patient encounters for a two-year period and if that list meets predetermined criteria, then the physician is invited to sit for the oral exam.

“In December of 1985, I was in Chicago for less than 24 hours to take my board exams,” said Palmer. “It was a three-hour oral exam and represented the culmination of 26 years of hard work. Only if you are board certified, you may be inducted into the American College of OB-GYN.”

A Lifetime of Memories

Palmer announced her retirement one year ago in September. She did this for many reasons including having the opportunity to give each of her patients, some who have been with her from the beginning, a heartfelt farewell. What she got in return, was a year full of remembering the good, the challenging, and the hilarious.

“I’ve had the most incredible time over this past year with my patients,” she said. “We have shared stories and laughed and wept. They have given me beautiful cards and gifts, as well.”

Some of those stories shared included blue lights and sirens. On more than a few occasions, when racing to the hospital to care for a mother in labor, Palmer found herself on the receiving end of a traffic stop.

“If I had a mother or baby in danger, I did speed and several times I would find blue lights behind me,” she explained. “I would not stop until I got to the hospital. This got me in hot water a few times.”

When looking back over her time at the practice, one of the low points was in 2002 when their office burned down over a weekend. ORMC allowed the doctors to see patients at the hospital while rebuilding their office space.

She said, “We moved medical equipment to the hospital in a pick-up truck. We got set up, started seeing patients at the hospital on Monday and didn’t miss one appointment.”

Some of the most rewarding memories from her medical work come from a mission trip to the Coast for Christ Baptist Hospital located in Ghana, Africa. Palmer, along with husband Robert, took donated medical equipment, medicine, and gently-used scrubs to the 17-bed hospital that served over 40,000 patients annually.

“Our hospital employees donated hundreds of scrubs that were very much appreciated by the hospital staff in Ghana,” said Palmer. “We also took life-saving drugs to treat malaria and mosquito nets to help prevent the disease.”

The medical equipment donated by ORMC included two patient beds, two birthing chairs, and a pediatric crib. A benefactor from Sandersville donated a cargo shipping container which was filled twice and shipped to the hospital with much needed medical items.

Through the donations, the hospital was able to increase its bed-size to 25, thus expanding its care for more critical patients. While in Ghana, Palmer worked at two outreach clinics treating all kinds of illnesses including high blood pressure and skin fungus.

“We treated hundreds of patients during the day and at night we were completely exhausted, but it was so rewarding,” said Palmer.

Looking Forward

The medical practice has changed over the years with Veal and Cardoso leaving decades ago, Dr. Charles Brown joining in the early 1990s, and the passing of Dr. Goodrich a few years back.

Although she will no longer practice medicine, she will continue to be involved by serving as chief medical officer (CMO) of ObGyn Associates.

“With me serving as CMO, Dr. Brown will be freed up to concentrate solely on patients,” observed Palmer. “He knows he can totally trust me at the administrative helm to take care of the practice while he cares for our patients.”

Palmer said she made the decision a few years ago that she would retire in 2018, coinciding with her 65th birthday. She said, “I knew that I wanted to go out while I was on top of my medical career.”

In 2006, she made a similar decision when she stopped flying planes. “After many years of enjoying flying and owning my plane, I knew it was time to stop and sell my plane,” she says.

As she looks to the next chapter, Palmer anticipates how life will be after medicine. She looks forward to sleeping without her phone, attending church with her husband without having to drive a separate car, and volunteering at Crossroads Pregnancy Center.

One of the items on her to do list is to be more active in her church-New City Church of Milledgeville. She will be taking over responsibilities to relieve her pastor's packed schedule.

"I also can't wait to pull weeds, work in my yard, pressure wash my driveway, and maybe even paint my fingernails-things others would find routine, I have not been able to do because of my schedule and profession," she says.

When asked if she would choose a life in medicine again, she quickly says yes. She does not hesitate to recognize that her professional life has been overwhelmingly rewarding, gratifying, and never dull.

"It never does get old," said Palmer referring to delivering babies. "It is a miracle and at every birth I feel the presence of God. Each child is different and unique in and of themselves. I have truly been blessed to do this in life."