

PATRICIA NUMANN, MD '65

A Master Mentor



Top: Dr. Numann, front row, third from right, at the Women in Surgery Africa launch event in Biantyre, Malawi. Bottom: Dr. Numann became an Honorary Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons Ireland in 2023.

Entering the home of Patricia Numann, MD '65, one is surrounded by the evidence of her travels over the years. Stone turtles from Galapagos. Artwork on the walls from Japan. A collection of wooden carvings from Africa.

As one of the most prominent female surgeons in the world and a staunch advocate of women's equity in the profession, Dr. Numann's presence has long been in demand at surgical meetings. At nearly 84, she continues to maintain a daunting travel schedule.

In August 2024, she traveled to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, for the International Society for Surgery meeting. The following month, she went to the Royal College of Surgeons of Ireland for the Inauguration of Deborah McNamara, marking the first time a female president succeeded a female president in any major surgical organization. In December, she traveled to Zimbabwe for the Women in Surgery Africa meeting, which she has attended nearly annually for the last 10 years. In February 2025, she gave the Mishra Oration for the King Charles Medical University in Lucknow, India (which she recorded from her home), then attended the Women in Surgery meeting in Clearwater, Florida. On her calendar this year are meetings in Charleston, South Carolina, and Seattle in the spring,

the American College of Surgeons Congress in Chicago in October, then Barcelona, where she'll receive the Gimbernat Award from the Catalan Surgical Society.

It's the latest in Numann's extensive list of honors, which include lifetime achievement awards from the International Society of Surgeons and the American College of Surgeons, the Elizabeth Blackwell Award from the American Medical Women's Association, an Honorary Doctor of Science Degree from SUNY Upstate, and honorary Fellowship in the Royal College of Surgeons of Glasgow, Edinburgh, Ireland, India, and Thailand.

Numann's retirement from clinical practice at age 65 was an intentional choice. Her mother died at 53, her father at 62, and her sister at 68. "I didn't anticipate living a long life," says the Lloyd S. Rogers Professor of Surgery Emeritus, SUNY Distinguished Service Professor, and SUNY Distinguished Teaching Professor Emeritus.

For the last 18 years, Numann has devoted herself to three areas of focus: developing online education modules for surgical trainees; advocating for and mentoring women surgeons in underserved areas, particularly Africa; and supporting the Norton College of Medicine through service and financial support of the Upstate Medical Alumni Foundation.

As director of the Cognitive Simulation Program for the American College of Surgeons, Numann developed an online program, Fundamentals of the Surgical Curriculum, to teach fourth-year medical students how to manage patients to prepare them for surgical residency. "Even though there's supervision, it's not minute to minute and there are a lot of decisions you have to make by yourself," she says. "This program was developed to help with that and is now sold by the ACS to all medical schools that teach in English."

She's also helped develop an advanced curriculum called Ready to Practice, intended for PGY3 residents and beyond, to help an individual assess their competency and readiness for individual practice.

A lifetime advocate for women in surgery, Numann began working with female surgeons in Africa 10 years ago when she was invited to speak at the meeting of a new organization, Women in Surgery Africa, in Malawi. Since then, she has regularly attended their meetings, and until last year, served as an oral examiner for their surgical board exams administered by the College of Surgeons of East, Central and Southern Africa (COSECSA).

"When I started, they were training seven women a year and now they're up to 29 a year," says Numann.

Through her efforts, the Association of Women Surgeons started a mentorship program and, in conjunction with the American College of Surgeons, supports scholarships for eight women annually who are completing training and taking their certification exams.

"We pay for the cost of the exam and for membership for them in COSECSA and the American College of Surgeons for five years so that they get the opportunity to develop professionally, then we have a reception for those women, and I usually end up promising at least one or two that I'll help them further their career," she says.

Closer to home, Numann maintains a 37-year commitment of service to the Upstate Medical Alumni Foundation. "I joined as a board member in 1978, but I've been an emeritus member for a long time," she says.

Her motivation is simple: "Upstate gave me the opportunity to become a physician when there were very few women accepted," she says. "I was actually accepted after my third year of college and received scholarships, which was economically huge for me because I came from a very poor family."

That loyalty, and her love for students, kept her in academic medicine at Upstate through the entirety of her career and drives her continued involvement in the Medical Alumni Foundation. "To this very day, my real motivation is to improve life for the students and see that they have less financial burden," she says. "I think it's your professional responsibility to give back. If every single alumnus gave even a little bit, it would make such a huge difference to student life."

—Renée Gearhart Levy

If you are interested in learning more about the Medical Alumni Foundation Board, please contact Paul Norcross, executive director, at norcrossp@upstate.edu.