

STUDENT ROUNDS

Taking the Long Route

AFTER YEARS OF SERVICE AND MOTHERHOOD, MEDICAL STUDENT KATHY BURKE '28 IS FINALLY PURSUING THE DREAM SHE NEVER LET GO.

When Kathy Burke '28 walks into a room, she rarely looks rattled. That calm has served her well in a lot of places: inside military aircraft hangars, in classrooms full of kindergarteners, during emergency calls with the Manlius Fire Department and now, at age 46, in the lecture halls and hospital corridors of medical school.

It has also helped her stand out among her classmates at Upstate Medical University's Norton College of Medicine, where Burke is starting her second year as part of the school's accelerated three-year MD program while raising five children, serving as class president, and continuing to volunteer as an EMT and firefighter.

But Burke insists her journey into medicine is not the result of a dramatic midlife reinvention. In many ways, she says, it began years ago.

"I've always been interested in medicine," Burke says. "My dad was a volunteer paramedic in our community for a really long time, so I grew up around that experience."

Burke was raised in Swansea, Massachusetts, the seventh of nine children in a busy, close-knit household where chaos was simply part of daily life. As a teenager, she volunteered as a candy striper at a local hospital, spending time on the postpartum floor and even helping cuddle infants in the NICU.

"I loved it," she says. "That interest was always there."

She accepted a full scholarship to the United States Air Force Academy, where she studied biochemistry with the intention to pursue medicine. Instead, she found herself pulled deeper into military life.

"I really believed in giving back and being part of something bigger," she says.

At the academy, Burke completed glider training, earned her parachuting license, and embraced the discipline and camaraderie of military culture. After graduation, she was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Air Force and entered aircraft maintenance, eventually working with F-16 fighter jets.

Her career took her around the world. While stationed in Italy, she met the man who would become her husband, Thomas, an Air Force officer and pilot. Ironically, the two had attended the academy at the same time without ever crossing paths.

Their actual introduction happened in the Czech Republic during a deployment connected to the first G8 summit after September 11. Both had been deployed to close the air space; she as the mainte-

nance officer representative and he as a pilot.

The couple married between overseas assignments and soon began building a family while navigating the demands of military life. But as deployments increased and the couple's family grew, the realities of military life became harder to balance.

"When I was pregnant with my second child, they told us we were both going to be deployed for a year and we needed to make a plan for our children," she recalls.

Instead, Burke chose to leave the Air Force when her commitment ended to focus on raising her family. They settled in Central New York after Thomas joined the Air National Guard at Hancock Air Base during its transition from F-16 operations to the MQ-9 Reaper program.



Kathy Burke '28 at University Hospital's Emergency Department



Burke reaffirming her military oath as she is promoted from 2nd Lieutenant to 1st Lieutenant while on deployment to Zaragoza Air Base, Spain.

From the outside, it may have looked as though Burke's path had veered permanently, but her dream never fully disappeared.

"There was always a little part of me that wondered what would have happened if I had gone to medical school," she says.

Then, in 2022, Burke's father experienced a rapid decline in health before dying of kidney failure. As she researched his illness and helped navigate his care, that old desire resurfaced with new urgency.

"I thought, I really should have done this," she says.

Although Burke had earned a master's in education while in the Air Force and now worked as an assistant teacher at a local elementary school, she never felt that teaching was her true calling.

To test the waters, Burke considered becoming a paramedic. She joined the Manlius Fire Department intending to focus on EMS work before discovering she also loved firefighting. Soon, she became an interior firefighter and volunteer EMT.

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—KATHY BURKE '28

She enrolled in a Princeton Review MCAT preparation program, which helped transition her back into academics. "It showed me that yes, I still want to do this. Yes, I'm willing to put in the time. And yes, I can still learn," she says.

After a visit with her father shortly before his death, she came back and said to her husband, "I have a crazy thought."

"And he said, 'That's not so crazy,'" she recalls.

With no plans to uproot her family, Burke applied to just one medical school: Upstate Medical University. "If this is God's plan, then it's going to work out," she recalls thinking.

At an Upstate information session, Admissions staff introduced Burke to Upstate's MedPrep program, a master's-level pathway designed to prepare students for medical school coursework. After completing the program and earning the required MCAT score, she interviewed for admission and was accepted into the Norton College of Medicine.

Now, Burke is part of Upstate's accelerated emergency medicine track, which combines medical school and residency training.

She says emergency medicine feels like a natural fit. "I love being the calm in the center of the storm," she says.

Despite her unconventional path, Burke says she has felt embraced by both classmates and faculty. She credits the culture of her class for helping ease her fears about being older than most of her peers.

"It gives me such hope for the future of medicine because everyone is so kind and so collaborative," she says.

Burke will graduate from medical school in 2028, the same year one of her sons graduates from high school. Another son is now following in his parents' footsteps to the Air Force Academy. Her oldest daughter, a student at SUNY Binghamton, is considering medical school at Upstate.

Looking back, Burke says she is deeply grateful that Upstate was willing to take a chance on a nontraditional student with a complicated résumé, five children, and a dream deferred for more than 20 years.

"I'm just so thankful that Upstate decided that I was worth taking a chance on," she says.



Burke and her husband while serving in the Air Force