

The major is the general surgeon at St. Francis

Archmere graduate honed her surgical skills while serving with the Army Reserves in Iraq

By Mike Lang
Staff reporter

WILMINGTON — Katherine Sahn recalled a Christmas from her early childhood, when she showed her older brother a department store catalog and told him she wanted a doctor's bag for Christmas.

"He said no, I was a girl, I had to have the nurse's bag. As far as we can tell, that's why I decided to become a doctor," she said. "It never really entered my mind to do anything else."

Sahn, 38, arrived at St. Francis Hospital in April as its first general surgeon after five years in private practice. She said the hospital was looking to grow its general surgery and women's health programs, which matched up with her interests.

"There aren't very many women general surgeons, at least in Delaware. Women very often feel more comfortable with a female. I also have a personal interest in taking care of cancer patients. It can be difficult emotionally, it takes a lot of time, but I enjoy that part of what I do," said Sahn, who also directs St. Francis' physician assistant program.

Inspired at schools

Sahn attended Immaculate Heart of Mary School and Archmere Academy while growing up in Brandywine Hundred, where her parents, William and



The Dialog/Don Blake

Dr. Katherine Sahn, with patient Juanita Allen, arrived at St. Francis Hospital in April as the hospital's first general surgeon.

Cathy, still live. She said teachers at both schools had an impact on her. At IHM, she remembered the encouragement she

received from Sister St. Mark, now deceased.

"She said to us, 'You can do whatever

you want to do. Don't let anyone tell you different.' She really made a big impact on me."

She found the same kind of support at Archmere. "What Archmere did for me as a school in general is instill in me the ability to think, more so than anything else. No matter what you were good at, they encouraged you to think and to excel in what your talent was."

Something else she likes about Archmere is its family-like atmosphere. She recalled that two years ago, the school dedicated its softball field to the 1990 team, of which she was a member. That team was Archmere's lone softball state champion. Sahn said about 10 of the 14 players returned to the campus for the dedication even though not all of them live nearby.

Her softball coach, Paul Pomeroy, who also taught her physics, said he "can't say enough" about his former student and athlete.

"Katie was a fierce competitor who never gave less than her best. She never quit even during tough times and always put the team ahead of any self-praise or personal glory," said Pomeroy, who still teaches at Archmere.

Sahn was a three-sport athlete for the Auks, also playing volleyball and basketball, even coming back after reconstructive

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Surgeon: Officer and athlete

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knee surgery she had when she was a sophomore. Despite a bolt and screw in her right knee, which are still there, she played volleyball at Lafayette College and has been active throughout her life.

Iraq vet

For the past 10 years Sahn has been in the Army Reserves, joining during her fourth year of medical school. Two years ago she spent three months with an infantry unit in Iraq. Three months may not sound like a long time, but "when you're there, 93 days feels like a year and a half. I was in a very small place with the infantry with very scant living conditions, living in a tent with 24 other people. There were three women. It was interesting."

The base was accessible only by chopper, and there were few of the comforts that the larger bases had. It didn't have phones

until a few days before she left, and mail was delivered once a week. She said the austere conditions helped her improve her surgical skills.

"There's nobody else around," she said. "It was me and another surgeon, that's it, so you better figure something out because it's just the two of you."

The real credit, she said, belongs to the troops who are serving 12- to 15-month tours, some more than one, not to her.

Sahn, a major who is eligible to be deployed again next year, said she lost about 20 to 25 pounds during her tour, as she took up running to get some exercise.

"When I came back I did a marathon, and I've been running

ever since. This summer I got bored with running, so I started doing triathlons. So I'm going to do a half Ironman next summer.

You've got to keep it interesting," said Sahn, who also golfs.

At St. Francis, Sahn welcomes the opportunity to be part of the hospital's mission to serve the community.

She said she likes the focus on individuals, the pastoral care, the impact the hospital can have on the community, and the willingness to serve the poor and uninsured.

"It really seems to be a mission statement for St. Francis, to help the people that don't get any help otherwise, and that part for me has been very rewarding," she said.

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Two years ago, Sahn was one of two surgeons at a remote infantry base in Iraq.