

# Strength in Numbers

There are more women in medicine than ever before.  
At Upstate, female faculty have created a community to support  
one another and build equal opportunity.

By Renée Gearhart Levy



**F**ive years ago, four young faculty women from Upstate Medical University headed off to the AAMC Mid-Career Women Faculty Professional Development Seminar in Washington, DC. They represented different departments and didn't really know one another. But by the time they reconvened at the airport for their return trip, they had bonded over shared challenges as women in academic medicine. And by the time their plane departed for Syracuse, the groundwork had been laid for an organization for women to address those issues and support one another at Upstate Medical University.

"We'd all just received a lot of important advice and we sort of crystallized into a group at the airport," recalls neurologist Deborah Bradshaw, MD '84, of brainstorming with colleagues Ann Barash, MD '90, Sara Grethlein, MD, and Vicki Meguid, MD.

They formed the nucleus of Women in Medicine (WIM), an association that has grown to comprise the entire female faculty of the College of Medicine, College of Health Professions, College of Nursing and the Health Sciences Library at Upstate Medical University. The overriding goal of WIM is to enhance the status and satisfaction of women on the faculty.

"Many women did not have mentoring and did not feel they had a networking opportunity with colleagues for their own advancement," says Sara Grethlein, Upstate professor of medicine and associate dean for Graduate Medical Education.

At that time, only 15 percent of full professors and 11 percent of department chairs at U.S. medical schools were women. And there were no female faculty chairs at Upstate.

In five short years, the group has become a robust voice at the institution and has influenced important landmarks. The College of Medicine has added women in important leadership positions, including a senior associate dean for faculty affairs and development, a position that has enriched and professionalized faculty development. The Dean of the College of Medicine includes WIM in the interviewing process

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for key positions at the institution, and five women department chairs have been hired in the last five years.

WIM serves its constituency through a mentoring program, an annual professional development day, a listserv that announces news and accomplishments, and with monthly meetings and a monthly book group. Men are welcome to participate but the needs are driven by women.

At present, WIM is led by clinical chair Victoria Meguid, MD, and basic science chair Susan Graham, MS. In a nutshell, "WIM provides support for the female faculty at SUNY Upstate," says Meguid, associate professor of pediatrics. "We are respected as a professional group of advocates that has been successful in bringing together a diverse faculty."

Current and former Upstate faculty Leslie Kohman, Ann Botash, Barbara Streeten, Ruth Weinstock, Sharon Brangman, Patricia Numann, Ruth Hart and Ellen "Cookie" Cook-Jacobsen at the Changing the Face of Medicine exhibit at Upstate's Health Sciences Library in 2006.



Part of WIM's vigor is due solely to numbers: There are more women faculty members at Upstate than ever before. In truth, there have been women's faculty organizations at Upstate as long as there have been women faculty members. The first, the Faculty Women's Caucus, was started in the 1970s by Patricia Numann, MD '65. It became inactive, mostly because there were so few members, none of whom had tenure.

Numann actually served as associate dean of the College of Medicine from 1978 to 1984. "It was a brave decision for Dr. George Reed, the Dean at the time," she says, as there were no women deans and very few women associate deans nationally. In that role she attended a leadership workshop for women physicians jointly sponsored by the American Medical Women's Association and American Association of Medical Colleges (AAMC).

In 1981, Dr. Numann invited as many female surgeons as she could identify to breakfast at the annual meeting of the American College of Surgeons. Sharing many common experiences, interests, and concerns, these women decided to meet yearly on an informal basis, and ultimately incorporated as the Association of Women Surgeons.

The following year, the Faculty Women's Caucus at Upstate was re-started by a group that included Numann, Helen Tepperman,

PhD, Barbara Streeten, MD, Susan Stearns, PhD, Patricia Randall, MD, and Elinor-Spring Mills, PhD, who that year had become the first woman at Upstate to be tenured and the first full professor in the basic sciences.

“In the late 1970’s and early 1980’s, the idea of a glass ceiling for women was only beginning to be recognized and was the subject of scrutiny and disbelief,” says Dr. Spring-Mills, Distinguished Teaching Professor of Cell and Developmental Biology, who served as president of the group for four years. “Our group in the early 1980’s was concerned about the fact that essentially no women in the basic sciences, other than me, had both tenure and full professorship, and there were no full professors and few women with tenure in the clinical departments.”

The overarching goal of the group was to get tenure and promotion for more deserving women on the faculty, she says. “In some cases, we fought for two or more years to get certain members tenured and/or promoted. In the end, we were successful.” (Essentially, all of the women mentioned above were promoted or tenured during that time interval, she says.)

When Leslie Kohman, MD, HS ’85, joined the faculty following completion of her Upstate thoracic surgery fellowship, she joined Alix Robinson, PhD, in creating a subgroup to the Women’s Faculty Caucus that brought together women from the clinical and basic sciences to discuss research. “It was an attempt to build collaboration among the basic and clinical scientists, which is a problem we still have,” she recalls. “We were very active for two or three years.”

When Patricia Numann, MD ’65, was a medical student at Upstate, she and the other female medical students belonged to a sorority which had the portrait of Elizabeth Blackwell painted as a gift to the College.



## Changing the Face of Medicine

Out of 680 faculty members in the College of Medicine, 186 are women. Five of them share how they chose medicine and why they think it’s a great career path.

Leslie Kohman, MD, HS ’85, as a child. “My grandmother sewed the costume, and my mother bought a doctor’s kit — it contained more items than the nurse’s kit. The reason this is a doctor outfit rather than nurse is because of the head mirror, which was not included in the nurse kit.”



### Leslie Kohman, MD, HS ’85

UPSTATE FACULTY MEMBER SINCE 1985

**W**hen she was 12-years-old, Leslie Kohman was asked to write an autobiography for a school assignment, looking back on a career path not yet taken.

Kohman wrote about becoming a doctor, how it had been hard but it was worth it because that’s what she really wanted to do.

Her mother went out and bought her a toy doctor’s kit. Her grandmother sewed her a doctor outfit: a white dress and a headband with a pretend light attached to it.

Despite the early encouragement, she considered other options as she was graduating from Boston University, including graduate programs in education and paleontology. She worked for a year in a research lab at the Tufts New England Medical Center and applied to medical school. “When I was asked during my interviews why I wanted to be a doctor, I said I knew I’d never be bored a day in my life,” Kohman recalls.

That turned out to be true.

She was slightly dissatisfied with her experience as a general surgeon, however. After complet-

ing medical school at Penn State and her residency the Guthrie Clinic, Kohman set up private practice in Norwich, New York, and quickly discovered that the small town practice of general surgery was not what she wanted to do with her life. She began exploring opportunities for further training, and when she discovered the Upstate thoracic surgery fellowship program had an unexpected opening, she jumped at the spot.

When Kohman completed her thoracic surgery fellowship in 1985, she became only the 36th woman in the United States to become board certified in the specialty. When she joined the department as an assistant professor, she became the Upstate Department of Surgery’s first female faculty member in thoracic surgery.

Kohman was hired to do cardiac surgery. When a more senior faculty member went on sabbatical in 1989, Kohman filled in on the general thoracic cases and found the work more to her liking. Around the same time, she became involved with Cancer and Leukemia Group B, one of several large multi-university consortia engaged in the clinical research of cancer. For the last 20 years, general thoracic surgery and lung cancer has remained her clinical and academic interest.



Leslie Kohman, MD, HS '85, was Upstate's first female thoracic surgeon.

As one of the pioneer women surgeons at Upstate, Kohman has done a tremendous amount of mentoring: at Upstate, through the Society of Thoracic Surgeons, Women in Thoracic Surgery, the Association of Women's Surgeons, as assistant dean for Faculty Development, and through promotion and tenure activities in the Department of Surgery.

"I've gotten great satisfaction from helping young surgeons achieve their career goals, both women and men," says Kohman. "I do a lot of talking to medical students and residents about surgery as a lifestyle, and in the last 10 years or so, the male medical students are just as concerned with lifestyle considerations as the women."

While Kohman chose not to have children, most of the female surgeons now at Upstate are mothers. "You do probably have to make choices and sacrifices in life to be a surgeon, but you have to do that no matter what you do in life, whether you're a woman or a man."

Kohman says medicine is a great career if for nothing than the great variety and flexibility of career options, using herself as an example. "I've done general surgery, cardiac surgery, thoracic and cancer surgery, administration, and clinical research," she says. "You'll never be bored and you'll never be out of a job."

Inspired by Dr. Numann's efforts, Dr. Kohman also founded the Women in Thoracic Surgery organization. "Our medical center should be very proud of being the founding home of these international medical organizations for women," she says.

Kohman, a full professor who has served both as interim chair of Upstate's Departments of urology and surgery, tries to attend as many WIM events as her schedule allows. "Because we have not historically had an equal place at the table in medicine, it's very important for women to feel they have someone to discuss their problems with, to turn to for support. Despite progress, women remain underrepresented at higher positions of leadership in academic medicine," she says. "There are disproportionately few women deans, department chairs, and other senior leadership."

For many years, that discrepancy was believed to be a "pipeline" problem—there were few women physicians, not all had careers in academic medicine, thus understandably fewer women in leadership positions in academic medicine.

Dr. Spring Mills, for example, recalls being the only woman in her graduate program at Harvard Medical School in the 1960s, where there were also only a few female medical students. Six women graduated in Numann's class at Upstate. But for at least the last 10 years, most medical schools, Upstate included, have been comprised of at least 50 percent women.

That's been going on at a rate long enough that there are plenty of assistant professors, says Kohman, but the numbers drop off disproportionately as you get higher up the ladder.

In early October, the National Institutes of Health announced a \$1-million, four-year study to explore barriers to success for women at academic medical centers.

"The statistics show that historically, retention and promotion of women in academic medicine has not kept pace with that of men in the same institutions," said Deborah L. Helitzer, ScD, professor of family and community medicine and assistant dean for research education at the University

of New Mexico School of Medicine, and principal investigator of the study.

The national study hopes to shed light on the culture change needed to improve recruitment and retention of women in science and lead to the development of policy regarding professional development for improving representation of women faculty at the highest levels of leadership in academic medical institutions.

Although peer institutions have caught up, Kohman believes Upstate was ahead of the curve. Some of that may have to do with Upstate's location in a region that fostered the suffragette movement and its claims to both Elizabeth Blackwell, the nation's first woman doctor, and Sarah Logeun Fraser, the nation's fourth black woman doctor. Many current women physicians at Upstate look no further

than the influence of Patricia Numann, who was Upstate's Lloyd S. Rogers Professor of Surgery and medical director of University Hospital before her retirement in 2005.

"Because of Dr. Numann's early pioneering efforts, the Upstate Department of Surgery has always been a woman-friendly program for residents," Kohman says. Compared with other programs around the country, Upstate has had a fairly substantial number of women faculty members through the years. "Currently, 25 percent of surgery faculty members are women (6 of 24), most of them heads of divisions, including vascular surgery, transplant surgery, breast and endocrine, and the burn surgeon," she says.

According to WIM data, 32 percent of medical faculty nationwide are women. Male faculty achieve tenure at twice the rate

of female faculty. Only 4 percent of women faculty members are at full professor rank compared to 21 percent of men. Ten of the 125 U.S. medical school deans are women.

At Upstate, women make up 186 of the 680 clinical and basic science faculty and 28 percent of the new hires. In the College of Medicine, there are six female department chairs out of 25 departments.

Some argue that part of the discrepancy is due to choice. "The research shows that female physicians continue to bear a disproportionate share of family and home responsibilities," says Grethlein, leading some women to forgo labor intensive leadership positions.

For example, Bradshaw, associate professor of neurology and Neurology Program Residency Director, says she would never

## Sharon Brangman, MD '81

**UPSTATE FACULTY MEMBER SINCE 1989**

**A**s a young doctor working in the South Bronx to pay off her National Health Service Corps obligation, Sharon Brangman, MD '81, made an interesting observation: While her younger patients were often "looking for a doctor's note to stay home," her older patients wanted to do whatever they could to stay active and independent, even though many of them had serious health issues.

"I was drawn to these older people who had so many illnesses but still wanted to do things for themselves," she says.

Directed by that new interest, Dr. Brangman enrolled in only the second year of a new fellowship program in geriatric medicine at Montefiore Medical Center. When she joined the Upstate Department of Medicine a few years later, the field was still in its infancy. "I was able to work hard and create a lot of the pieces that are here today," she says.

Over the last 20 years, she has become one of the nation's leading geriatricians and advocates for senior citizens' health. Today, Brangman, is professor of medicine, chief of Geriatric Medicine, director of the Geriatric Medicine Fellowship Program (which she founded), director of the Central New York Alzheimer's Disease Assistance Center, and president-elect of the American Geriatrics Society.

At Upstate, the bulk of her time is spent working in the management of Alzheimer's disease and the care of older people in the office, hospital, and nursing home settings. Nationally, she focuses on health-care workforce issues for the aging population, including the shortage of geriatricians.

But it wasn't always that way. "I've taken on more now because my kids are older," says Brangman. The mother of two grown children (including a daughter off to medical school next year), she says she was not at all active on the national front when her children were younger and it was all she could do just to get to school field trips and concerts. The older her kids got, the more entrenched Brangman was in her field, and the more well known on a national level.

Before WIM was a formal entity, Brangman says she created her own network of women faculty, both on campus and off, to help guide her career. "When I was starting out, there were not a lot of structured programs that showed women how to be successful. A lot of it I had to find on my own and advocate for myself," says Brangman, who became Upstate's first African-American female full professor in 2003. She has made a point of reaching out to those coming behind. "One of my goals is to help other women, other medical students, do it without the same level of angst that I sometimes had."



Sharon A. Brangman, MD '81

Brangman says it's easy for women considering medicine to look at the big picture and get overwhelmed. "The way to view it is to realize there are so many people who have done it, and done it successfully, that it's possible to do," she says. "There's no mold that you have to fit. You have to figure out what works for you."

seek a chair position. “I don’t want any more commitments or time away from my family life,” she says. “But certainly there are men out there making those same choices. The positions should be attainable for the women who want them.”

Two years ago, when Upstate President David R. Smith took the helm at Upstate, he chose to forgo a traditional inauguration celebration to instead fund the first SUNY Upstate Symposium, intended to be an annual event covering a variety of timely and provocative topics.

That inaugural symposium, “On the Other Side of the Glass Ceiling: Reflections on the Status of Women in Science and Academia,” included a panel of five female college presidents—Debbie L. Sydow, Ph D, of Onondaga Community College, Deborah



## Deborah Bradshaw, MD '84

**UPSTATE FACULTY MEMBER SINCE 1990**

**A**s an undergraduate at Wellesley College, Deborah Bradshaw, MD '84, studied biology and psychology, constructing a major that studied the biology of behavior.

A natural caretaker since childhood, she interviewed at graduate nursing programs but instead took a job working for a doctor at the National Eye Institute, where she was exposed to more sophisticated cognitive material. With his encouragement, Bradshaw applied to medical school. After graduating from Upstate, she did her residency in neurology at Boston University and a fellowship in clinical neurology and electromyography at the Lahey Clinic.

Then she took 18 months off before joining the Upstate faculty part time. Her part-time work continued for eight years as she raised young children. “I was very firm about my commitment to do that,” Bradshaw says. “I grew up on a farm with a traditional mother who had inculcated in me the importance of breast feeding and of child rearing. I think per-



Deborah Bradshaw, MD '84

Elinor Spring-Mills, PhD, was Upstate’s first female full professor in the basic sciences.

haps that’s why I didn’t explore medical school for all those years, because I didn’t think I could do both.”

But depending on the situation chosen, medicine is a career that allows a fair amount of flexibility and autonomy, says Bradshaw, who has been a full-time faculty member for 11 years with a specialty in neuromuscular medicine and electromyography. Since 2006, she has also been director of the neurology residency program.

The downside? Being a physician can be an isolating experience, but she says organizations such as Women in Medicine are “a balm against that.”

“I think the caretaking qualities that a lot of women have can be troublesome for us,” she says. “The tendency is to do too much—to do too much for others. Whether it’s a genetic tendency or cultural, I think it’s common.”

Bradshaw is involved in several womens’ groups besides WIM, including the Syracuse Chargers, a group of female rowers, and a women’s Bible study.

“Women really get energy from each other,” she says. “These kinds of associations allow you to see that the challenges you face are not unique. The struggles to meet all your responsibilities, to get everything done—it’s not just you.”

“The greatest achievement of the present WIM group. . . has been to push for women department chairs. We have come a very long way since four or five years ago when Upstate ranked close to the very bottom in terms of the number/percent of women faculty and department chairs (we had none).”

—Elinor Spring-Mills PhD

## Sara Jo Grethlein, MD

**UPSTATE FACULTY MEMBER SINCE 1994**

**S**ara Jo Grethlein, MD, grew up in a household imbued with medicine. Her father, Eli Friedman, MD, Distinguished Teaching Professor at Downstate Medical University is an internationally known nephrologist who invented the “suitcase kidney,” a portable dialysis machine.

Improbably, her mother, Mildred “Barry” Friedman, required a kidney transplant from complications of Type-1 diabetes developed after child-bearing, and was a longtime patient of his department until her death 18 years later.

From them both, Grethlein says, she was exposed to the full spectrum of medicine at a young age and totally fell in love with it. “I was never pushed into medicine, but grew up with the romance of medicine,” going on rounds with her dad from the age of seven.

Grethlein studied chemical engineering at Washington University in St. Louis, then



Sara Jo Grethlein, MD



Christine Chen, MD '05, assisting in a bilateral tubal ligation while a third-year Upstate medical student.

attended medical school at SUNY Brooklyn before returning to Washington University for her internship, residency, and fellowship. She is triple board certified in internal medicine, hematology, and medical oncology.

“I deal with patients in difficult circumstances, very tough times in their lives and we get very close,” she says. “As

physicians, we have an incredible privilege in the relationships we’re able to have with our patients and the way they enrich our lives.”

As professor of medicine and associate dean for Graduate Medical Education, Grethlein splits her time between clinical

medicine and administration and was also instrumental in the development of the undergraduate Practice of Medicine course.

She has been actively involved in recruiting women to the faculty, including her sister, Amy Friedman, MD, who joined Upstate as chief of transplant surgery from Yale last year.

“Medicine is a great career for women because it offers us intellectual, emotional and financial satisfaction, but it also gives us flexibility,” she says. “With a medical degree, you can craft a career that suits you, based on your own goals and needs.”

F. Stanley, PhD, of SUNY Oswego, Lois B. DeFleur, PhD, of Binghamton University, Rebecca S. Chopp, PhD, of Colgate University, and Donna Shalala, PhD, of the University of Miami.

President Smith has since created the President's Advisory Council on Women's Issues, an outcome of the Engaging Excellence initiative. And half of the members of his own President's Leadership Council are women.

The first six female department chairs have all been appointed by Dean Steven Scheinman since he became dean in 2004—156 years after Elizabeth Blackwell received her degree, as well as three senior associate deans who are women (Paula Trief, PhD, senior associate dean for faculty affairs and faculty development; Lynn Cleary, MD, senior associate dean for education; and MaryGrace VanNortwick, senior associate dean for resource management).

In addition, he has sponsored Kohman and Grethlein to participate in the Executive Leadership in Academic Medicine (ELAM) Program for Women at Drexel University College of Medicine, a program focused on preparing senior women faculty at schools of medicine, dentistry and public health for institutional leadership positions where they can effect positive change.

"To be involved in reshaping the complexion of leadership at the College of Medicine is perhaps what I am most proud of," says Dr. Scheinman of his actions as dean. "Each of these women was hired because she was the best candidate for the job."

While there may be more institutional support for women in leadership at Upstate than at any time in its history, WIM remains as vital as ever.

"The greatest achievement of the present WIM group, in my opinion, has been to push for women department chairs," says Spring-Mills. "We have come a very long way since four or five years ago when Upstate ranked close to the very bottom in terms of the number/percent of women faculty and department chairs (we had none)."

She also points to the friendly forum for women faculty and students throughout Upstate.

"It's not all about climbing the ladder," adds Bradshaw. "WIM enriches my life and makes my work more pleasurable because I have more connections. My work is more three dimensional. It's about community." ■



Danielle Katz, MD '97

## Danielle Katz, MD '97

### UPSTATE FACULTY MEMBER SINCE 2003

**A**s a senior at Yale, Danielle Katz, MD '97, tore her anterior cruciate ligament playing touch football. When she told her orthopedic surgeon she was in the process of applying to medical schools and was interested in orthopedic surgery, he invited the biology major to observe a few procedures in the operating room.

"I liked the idea of taking care of people who were hurt more than people who were sick," she says. "I liked the idea of being able to fix things."

As a volunteer at the Hillside Pediatric Clinic in her first year in medical school at Upstate, Dr. Katz discovered she also liked working with children. She joined the faculty of the Upstate Department of Orthopedic Surgery after completing residency training at Upstate and her fellowship at Boston Children's Hospital.

As a pediatric orthopedist, Katz cares for a variety of orthopedic problems in children, but has particular interests in scoliosis and hip dysplasia. In fact, she has begun treating young adults with hip dysplasia as well because she is the only surgeon in the area doing periacetabular osteotomies to treat hip dysplasia in skeletally mature individuals in

order to try to prevent or delay the onset of arthritis.

Katz has been on the American College of Surgeons Women in Surgery committee since she was a resident and considers it valuable to be in a position to advocate for others if necessary. "I've been really lucky that in the places where I've done my training, it just hasn't been a big deal that I've been a woman," she says.

She's a common target for female medical students who are interested in surgical fields. "What I tell them is that, for women and men, I don't know that you can have everything. "But if you figure out the two or three things that are most important to you, those are probably achievable, you just might have to be a little creative."

The author of a number of journal articles and book chapters, Katz has not pursued her research to the degree she had once hoped, particularly since the birth of her almost-three-year-old daughter. "Right now, my daughter and my clinical practice come first," she says. "I struggle to make time for research."

Despite the juggling act, "Women are just as capable as men at doing anything they want, in medicine or otherwise," says Katz. "It is interesting to me that there are still people out there who were not raised in such a way to believe that."