February is American Heart Month, a time of special resonance for Dawn D’Elia, of Saugerties.

Three years ago, D’Elia, a middle-school teacher, suffered a massive heart attack that was directly related to smoking. She was just 45 years old.

“I remember it like it was yesterday. I was up in front of my class, giving out awards to my seventh- and eighth-graders, when all of a sudden I was hit with an intense burning sensation in my chest,” D’Elia said.

She was rushed to Columbia Memorial Hospital, but shortly after arriving was transferred to Albany Med where she underwent emergency quadruple bypass surgery, performed by Edward Bennett, MD, chief of the Division of Cardiothoracic Surgery.

Within hours of the operation, D’Elia met Sulagna Mookherjee, MD, who became her cardiologist.

“There’s a good chance this may have been 100 percent preventable,” Dr. Mookherjee said. “Her smoking habit was the main reason she became my patient and, in order to restore her to health, I needed her to quit.”

D’Elia remembers their first meeting vividly. “Shortly after waking up from surgery, Dr. Mookherjee came into my room. She explained what Dr. Bennett and his team had done to repair my heart, and then she walked to the other side of my bed and took off my nicotine patch,” D’Elia recalled. “She told me that this was my second chance, and I wouldn’t be needing the patch anymore, because she was going to make sure I quit smoking.”

Dr. Mookherjee, current president of the American Heart Association’s Capital Region chapter, said that D’Elia, prior to her heart attack, experienced a classic symptom of cardiovascular disease.

“Dawn told me that a week before her heart attack she was experiencing jaw pain, which is a very common symptom of heart disease in women, along with other symptoms such as unexplained pain in the back or neck,” Dr. Mookherjee said. “Heart disease is the leading cause of death in women, yet many have no idea what the symptoms are.”

Today, thanks to the cardiac care she received at Albany Med, D’Elia is back to teaching and spending time with her rambunctious grandchildren. She said she hopes her story will help raise awareness about heart disease, particularly for women.

“We tend to be so focused on taking care of everyone but ourselves,” D’Elia said. “Women need to take the time to learn about heart disease and make sure they are putting their health first.”

Albany Med’s 2014 Employee of the Year Recognized for “Selfless Dedication”

“Before I even knew what the field of child life was, I knew my dream was to work with children in a hospital setting,” said Angela Silipigno, MSEd., CCLS, whose precocious about her professional calling was recognized on a large scale last month when she was named Albany Medical Center’s 2014 Employee of the Year.

Now in her seventh year as a child life specialist, Silipigno educates and supports pediatric patients and their families as they undergo significant medical treatments at the Melodies Center for Childhood Cancer and Blood Disorders at the Bernard & Millie Duker Children’s Hospital. She finds creative ways to help young patients work through their fears, and identifies resources to help families adjust to the demands and challenges of caring for children with serious illnesses.

“Angela is the embodiment of what we stand for here at Albany Med,” said Albany Med President and CEO Jim Barba. “Her dedication to her patients, their families and our community is simply remarkable.”

“To be able to share in the intimate and often delicate treatment journey with these children and their families is a privilege I do not take lightly,” Silipigno said. “My hope is to be able to provide them with care and support to ease the emotional strain that comes with coping with a cancer diagnosis.”

Silipigno also noted the “tremendous team” she is a part of at the children’s hospital. “It’s an honor to work alongside them,” she said.

Colleagues who nominated Silipigno for the award praised her compassion and proactive nature. “Nobody has to look for Angie,” one nominator said. “She is always there when you need her.”

Patients and families noted Silipigno’s warmth, empathy and ability to “bring out the best in others, even on the hardest days.”

The mother of a pediatric cancer patient who’d undergone chemotherapy treatments said, “When my daughter claimed she looked like a boy, because she had no hair, Angie printed out pictures of all the Disney princesses with no hair and helped her point out all the things that made these girls beautiful. That picture still hangs in my daughter’s room today. Angie is always there for us. She has become a part of our family.”
Area Family Honors Son’s Memory with a Gift to Support Pediatric Patients

When the DeMarco family, of Rotterdam, presented the Bernard & Millie Duker Children’s Hospital at Albany Medical Center with a $130,000 check in January, they were delivering on a promise they made to their late son Tyler DeMarco.

A former patient at the children’s hospital, Tyler passed away in 2010 at age 12 following a four-year battle with cancer.

“In honor of our son, we are committed and determined to fulfill Tyler’s wish to make a difference for children with cancer,” said Don DeMarco, Tyler’s father. “Tyler’s goals are now our mission derived from the love, compassion and ‘never-give-up’ determination Tyler demonstrated throughout his short and precious life. Tyler’s belief that ‘no kid should have to go through this’ is what keeps us motivated in the fight against childhood cancer.”

DeMarco, along with Tyler’s mother, Pam DeMarco, and his brother, Ryan DeMarco, presented the gift to pay tribute to the staff of the children’s hospital, who they came to know well during Tyler’s battle with brain cancer.

The generous gift from the Tyler DeMarco Foundation will support an endowment for the “Journeys” program, which provides support and services for families of children with serious medical conditions. The funding will also support the Bernard & Millie Duker Children’s Hospital Renovation Fund for the cost of a private, inpatient room named in memory of Tyler DeMarco.

“We are so grateful for this gift,” said David A. Clark, MD, director of the children’s hospital. “Just as Tyler lived, driven by his spirit to ‘never give up,’ we will never forget the difference he and his family are making for other children battling cancer.”

New PA Students Welcomed

Albany Medical College’s Physician Assistant Studies Program welcomed a new class of PAs with the traditional White Coat Ceremony. The class of 42 was drawn from 1,150 applicants, representing an increasing demand for physician assistants across the country. Sixty percent of the incoming students are from New York State, and some come from as far away as Texas and Tennessee.

Graduates of Albany Med’s PA Program—one of the oldest in the country—have experienced a 100 percent first-time certification pass rate three years in a row.

ALBANY MED ALL-STAR

Sulejmana Sasic

Environmental Support Team Associate, Post-Anesthesia Care Unit

Sulejmana Sasic’s colleagues voiced their unanimous appreciation for her warm nature and the standard of excellence she brings to the Post-Anesthesia Care Unit. She is admired by coworkers and patients alike, nominators said, not only for her kindness and contagious smile, but also for doing such a remarkable job keeping the unit clean and in good order. One coworker noted, “I don’t think the word ‘no’ is in her vocabulary. She always goes the extra mile.”

Another colleague said, “We all respect and admire Sulejmana’s strong, proud work ethic. She’s an invaluable member of our team—one who truly shines!”

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Vice Dean for Clinical Affairs
Nurse Brings Lessons Learned in Aviation to Albany Med

Flying planes and working in health care have two things in common, said Timothy Costa, RN, BSN, of the Post-Anesthesia Care Unit (PACU). “In both professions it’s safety first,” he said. “And there is zero room for error.”

Costa, who has worked at Albany Med for nearly 20 years, learned to fly single-engine Cessnas in the 1980s. “I flew strictly for pleasure. It was a hobby,” he said.

Still, Costa learned some pretty serious lessons while pursuing the adventurous pastime—knowledge he brings to his role as the PACU safety officer.

Checklists are a must. He and his colleagues make daily checks of their stands and equipment before their shifts begin—and not just the equipment they will use that day, but their backup supplies as well. Are the crash carts and defibrillators ready for an emergency? Are the cables attached to the patient monitors clear of foot traffic? Do any of them look frayed?

“Check, check and check. Thankfully, Costa said, he works with a team of professionals who are hard-wired for this sort of excellence.

“In the PACU we treat all kinds of cases, and it keeps you on your toes. Just like flying,” he said, “you need to be ready to react to any kind of circumstance. You need to be alert.”

While Costa flew solo in his days as a pilot—he was the first student in his flight class to make a solo flight—he is now working with a team of caregivers who teach one another every day, whose reliance upon one another is crucial. And, for him, the notion of an Albany Med family extends even farther.

He met his wife, Dawne Costa, RN, at Albany Med.

Every child is given a book at the beginning of their appointment and it is theirs to keep. The book serves not only as something to hold the child’s attention, but also to lend the physician important clues about the child’s development.

“You can use the book as a tool to see how the child is doing developmentally,” said Dr. de Waal Malefyt. “If the child is six months old and can’t grasp the book that could indicate a problem. If the child is 18 months old and doesn’t show any interest in the book that could suggest there is a developmental issue.”

Reach Out and Read is a program that depends on volunteers and physicians to promote the work it does, and generous donations of books are always appreciated. According to Dr. de Waal Malefyt, the books needed most right now are board books for infants and toddlers.

From Pilot to PACU Safety Officer

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While their work lives rarely intersect—Dawne Costa is a nurse in the Division of Cardiothoracic Surgery—she thinks her husband serving as the PACU’s safety officer is a great fit. “He’s dedicated, he’s responsible and he knows how to keep his cool,” she said. “There’s no doubt in my mind he’s the right man for the job.”
Med Student Advocates for At-Risk Children

Medical student Preeti Panda wants the medical community to know that sex trafficking of minors is not just something associated with foreign countries or larger cities. In fact, she has found it’s a problem in Albany and surrounding communities.

“Sex trafficking of minors is what most people think of as child prostitution. When we refer to it as ‘trafficking,’ it has more of a sense of criminality and the urgency that it deserves,” said Panda, whose work to educate the medical community on the topic has put her on track to earn an MD with Distinction in Advocacy, the College’s newest degree distinction, when she graduates in 2017.

Panda said her eyes were opened to the problem when, as an AmeriCorps volunteer in her hometown of Ithaca, N.Y., she discovered one of her 14-year-old students was exploited by a trafficker.

“It turns out she fit the profile of an at-risk child. These children are often in foster care or from broken families, or they are runaways,” Panda explained. “I thought if this is happening in Ithaca, it must be a problem everywhere.”

After surveying local agencies about the problem, her project is now focused on the role of doctors in identification and prevention.

“This is a very violent business so children end up sick or injured, and frequently need to see doctors. Survivors face debilitating long-term health problems as well. It’s not just pediatricians and emergency physicians who should be looking for this, but orthopaedic surgeons and neurologists as well,” Panda said.

She plans to set up training programs for physicians and residents at Albany Med to assist them in looking for hallmarks of child trafficking.

Ingrid Allard, MD, associate dean for Community Outreach and Medical Education, said it’s important that medical students understand that the health of individuals depends on more than just writing a prescription.

“Social determinants of health, such as environment, policy, social justice, education and health access, directly impact health. Physicians are in a unique position to advocate for patients on an individual level as well as a more population-based level,” said Dr. Allard.

She said Panda’s project is a prime example of why advocacy is important.

Grateful Patient’s Gift Helps Raise Close to Three Times His Generous Donation

A near hat trick of good will for the Fund for Albany Med

David Bauer was in Cincinnati with his 12-year-old son Matthew in 2012, watching the New York Giants take on the Cincinnati Bengals, when a mild discomfort in his neck became increasingly acute. The pain led him to a local emergency room, where he was diagnosed with pneumonia.

It was not until the Schenectady resident returned home and sought treatment at Albany Med that the real root of the problem was discovered. He was found to have a pulmonary embolism, a potentially fatal blockage in the lung’s main artery that was caused, in Bauer’s case, by a blood clot in the deep veins of his legs. He was immediately admitted to the hospital and successfully treated by pulmonologist Thomas Smith, MD, and his team.

“For years, my family and I have been hearing from friends and people in the community about the great care they’ve received at Albany Med,” Bauer said recently. “I now count myself among them.”

As a gesture of thanks, Bauer, a regional executive vice president at Arthur J. Gallagher & Co. in Albany, made a personal pledge of $50,000 to the Fund for Albany Med, which helps support the Medical Center’s most pressing needs. He asked that his donation be used to match gifts during September and October of last year.

The result? Bauer’s generosity inspired the generosity of others, and more than $144,000 was raised. Albany Med extends its heartfelt thanks to David Bauer and to all who contributed to the Fund for Albany Med. Your benevolence will go a long way toward ensuring the best possible patient experience for all who pass through our doors.