

SAINT MARY'S SCHOOL

Alumnae Profile

Dr. Suzanne Parker Bulakowski '98HS

Optometrist

Digby Eye Associates

Dr. Suzanne Parker Bulakowski '98HS grew up in Davidson County the youngest of four children, and the only daughter of David and Nan Parker. As an alumna, Suzanne is passionate about her alma mater and strongly believes in the power of a Saint Mary's experience. Today, she is an Optometrist in Greensboro, North Carolina.

From Small Town to Global Experiences

Suzanne Parker grew up with three older brothers in the small town of Denton, North Carolina. Her oldest brother, Dave Jr., was 18 years her senior and in college at North Carolina State University when she was a kid. As Suzanne entered kindergarten, Dave began dating a former Saint Mary's girl, Jill DeAngelis, who'd attended the school from 1985-1986.

When Suzanne turned seven, the couple married and settled permanently to Raleigh. Over the years, Jill continued to tell stories to Suzanne about her time at Saint Mary's whenever Suzanne visited them in Raleigh, or when they came back home for holidays.

"By the time I was a teen, they would encourage me to come visit the school in person," Suzanne says. "In fact, it was mentioned often, but in my mind it was never going to happen. I was very involved in my hometown with dance, sports, and academics. I didn't really want to finish high school away from home, even though in many ways Dave was like a second father to me."

Suzanne says that even though she didn't think she'd move at that time, she was interested in a life outside of her small town, perhaps for college. "But, during my sophomore year of high school, my former first grade teacher Mrs. Libby Streetman, who was now the high school principal, called me into her office," she explains. "You can imagine I was a little worried wondering what I'd possibly done."

Instead, Mrs. Streetman had "gotten wind" in the small town that Suzanne might be considering boarding school at Saint Mary's and took matters into her own hands. "I admitted to her that my sister-in-law and brother had mentioned Saint Mary's to me, but I didn't have any plan to attend," she says. "Mrs. Streetman looked at me and said, 'Suzanne, you need to do this.' I respected her, so I listened and then set up a trip to Raleigh to see Dave and Jill. I also set up my campus visit."

Suzanne enjoyed her first glimpse of the school and the tour, which also included an "overnight" boarding experience with a host student sponsored by the Admissions Office. "I then fell in love with Saint Mary's," she says. "And, that was it for me."

Suzanne enrolled as a boarding student for her junior year and participated as a member of the Swim Team that year. "I'd never been on a competitive swim team before, and the girls were really good! They were year-round swimmers, and Saint Mary's was like their *second* team. It was a little intimidating, but I did it and they supported me through all those early morning practices."

Suzanne credits Saint Mary's for preparing her for college academically and socially. "I was challenged in ways I'd never before been challenged and learned to be inquisitive and think critically, while also being respectful," Suzanne explains. "I am so glad Mrs. Streetman pulled me into her office that day because when I went to college, I didn't have to adapt to being away from home as a freshman. Instead, I was a junior in high school learning time management, self-discipline, and utilizing teachers' office hours for guidance and assistance."

Suzanne says she learned to push herself to higher levels of achievement. "I learned how to be actively engaged in conversation and how to manage complex thought; to push myself to learn more and not be intimidated by what might seem daunting. I also learned to speak up when I needed to and was so prepared for my college years at Carolina. Coming to Saint Mary's made the transition to college easy because I had been able to build my confidence and learned just how much I was capable of."

She recalls taking a philosophy class taught by Dr. Steven W. Esthimer. "It was unlike anything I had taken before, and in reflection truly was one of the best courses I've ever taken. That experience, and



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the fact I was able to complete college level courses as a senior at Saint Mary's, is another reminder of the things that would not have been available options to me if I had stayed in Denton."

Suzanne says discipline in the classroom and experiences on and off campus helped her excel. "I learned how much time I needed to commit to something to achieve success, and whether or not I had the time for extracurricular activities. It helped build confidence in myself and my decisions. These years are so critical in a young woman's life, and I'm thankful I was given the opportunities and experiences provided by Saint Mary's."

After graduating, Suzanne went to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for her undergraduate degree. She majored in Biology with a dual minor in Chemistry and Spanish. She also participated in study abroad programs twice while in college. "That was definitely something I would not have done if Saint Mary's hadn't given me the confidence to explore the global world."

While at Carolina, Suzanne knew she wanted to see more, to learn about other cultures, their language, the people, the food, and she did both a summer and a semester study abroad experience. Today, she's fluent in Spanish and uses it often in her career.

Discovering Her Calling

Since 9th grade, Suzanne had been interested in a future in science or medicine. But it was at age 15, when she had a major eye injury, that would influence her later career. "I had an orbital fracture, and the eye muscles were caught in my cranial bones. I had to have reconstructive surgery to fix it," she shares. "I had never even had an eye exam prior to that and had taken mine for granted. It took six months before I no longer had double vision."

Though she took upper level classes at UNC in science and medicine, she hadn't yet decided what she'd specialize in. Suzanne began exploring options through several opportunities shadowing surgeons at Duke Eye Center and working with an optometrist in Chapel Hill.

Suzanne says from those experiences, she discovered a preference for being a primary eye care doctor for patients and working with individuals and families to provide lifelong care. "Many health conditions have ocular implications," she explains. "Today, I work directly with other physicians and eye surgeons to provide comprehensive care for each patient. My personal experience taught me how precious having eye sight is, so for grad school I decided I would dedicate myself to patients and help them with theirs."

Suzanne then enrolled in graduate school at Salus University's Pennsylvania College of Optometry north of Philadelphia. While there, she knew she wanted to come back to North Carolina eventually to be near family, but she felt confident in going wherever she needed to go to complete her degree and become a doctor.

"My Saint Mary's experience gave me the confidence to explore not only the world through study abroad but also to move in order to have success in the industry I was called to."

Suzanne completed her residency while at the University of Miami, Florida, at the Bascom Palmer Eye Institute (BPEI), one of the largest eye hospitals in the world who also saw patients from all over the world. She also completed her final rotation there and, unlike others who left for that requirement, got to spend two years "with the best of the best."

"I also met my future husband, Neill, while in Miami," she says. "Originally from the Chicago area, Neill and I met toward the end of our training. He'd finished undergrad and grad school at Indiana University then interned in Miami at BPEI where I was. We met at the right time in our career paths, because school and moving can take a toll on one's personal life."

Neill left to complete a residency in Baltimore for a year and they dated long distance. As they began applying for positions, Suzanne wanted to be near family. In 2008, she joined Digby Eye Associates in Greensboro, NC, and that same year became a Fellow of the American Academy of Optometry.

"I know how important it is to also be involved in my profession on the advocacy level, as well as maintaining a commitment to academic excellence, so from 2008 to 2013 I also served as the President of the Triad District of the North Carolina State Optometric Society and then served on the Board of Trustees for the North Carolina State Optometric Society for three years."

In 2013, Suzanne was recognized as North Carolina's Young Optometrist of the year.

"The rest is history! We have two boys, age four and age five, enjoy traveling, the culinary and fine arts, and are avid followers of our alma maters' sports teams."

An Engaged Alumna

Suzanne stays engaged as an alumna not only through attendance at regional and local events, keeping up with news from campus through social media, and through her personal gifts to Saint Mary's Annual Fund, she also remains connected through the lifelong friendships she developed during her years at Saint Mary's.

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"Boarding school affords one the opportunity to build unique bonds with fellow dormmates, and I am so thankful for the connections I made and the friendships I gained."

Saint Mary's also instilled in Suzanne the importance of leadership. "I learned to continuously strive to excel so one can enrich not only our own lives, but also those of others through working alongside people to make a difference and achieve new goals."

Additionally, Suzanne is a big advocate for study abroad programs for our students.

"I encourage all Saint Mary's girls to study abroad while they have the guidance and a safety net. The experience of living in another culture helps build respect for other communities and people. As a Health Care provider and a mom, it helps me be a better physician and member of my community. So, go give an experience outside your own bubble!"

Suzanne shared the changing demographics in her field for interested young women and offered to allow Saint Mary's students or young alumnae in college job shadow her.

"This industry is a terrific opportunity for women. More than forty-four percent of optometrists today are women and there is a terrific work-life balance. Plus, the projected job growth is 17.9%. And, as my mother-in-law always said, when you're in school go for a career, not just a degree."

Saint Mary's alumnae graduate with the skills, knowledge, and integrity they need for success. Whether furthering their education, pursuing professional careers, raising their families, or leading as volunteers, our alumnae are agents for positive change in their communities. Suzanne's story demonstrates the power Saint Mary's women have to change their lives and thrive in new and different careers. She also certainly embodies the spirit of Saint Mary's women who are educated to make a difference and who will help propel Saint Mary's forward into the future.

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