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Air Force veteran soars as NCHS leader



Physician Assistant Rochelle Zangen provides family practice care as a lead clinician at NCHS Ramona Health Center. (Julie Gallant)

By JULIE GALLANT

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South Africa native Rochelle Zangen, 35, has covered a lot of ground on her way to becoming a physician assistant at NCHS Ramona Health Center, and not just geographically.

Zangen's family roots go back to England, where her great-grandmother lived until she moved to South Africa in the early 1900s. Four generations of her family lived in South Africa, but her father, Bob Ferris, was born and raised in San Diego and also lived in Poway while he attended middle and high school.

"My grandmother (father's mother) was born in Ramona," Zangen said. "My mother grew up in South Africa. My father was born and raised in America in San Diego."

Ferris took his family back to Poway in 2000 in search of higher education opportunities for his children.

The family got what they were looking for with Zangen and her little sister, Lara Ray, both graduating from the University of San Diego with bachelor's degrees in biology, and her older sister, Taliyah Davila, earning her bachelor's degree in history at National University.

As an undergrad, Zangen worked part-time as an emergency medical technician and volunteered at Palomar Pomerado Hospital in Escondido to get practical medical experience. She also worked at the hospital as a patient care technician from 2008-09.

She then advanced to earning a master's degree in health care administration at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh. She decided to specialize as a physician assistant by earning another master's degree at A.T. Still University in Mesa, Ariz.

By joining the Air Force in 2013, Zangen received a scholarship that paid for her physician assistant education.

"I had a commitment to the military, but I didn't serve active duty until I finished PA school," Zangen said.

Her service as an Air Force captain involved working as a physician assistant in family practice at Edwards Air Force Base near Los Angeles. The training she received there providing family practice care to active-duty members, their families, and retirees prepared her well for future roles.

"It was a very rewarding experience," Zangen said. "The training I received as a medical provider in the military was exceptional."

In addition to medical training, she said she received excellent leadership training. The adjunct skills helped her run her private family practice office in San Diego for one year after leaving the Air Force in 2017, and later helped her be a better medical provider where she currently works as a physician assistant at NCHS Ramona Health Center.



NCHS Physician Assistant Rochelle Zangen, left, listens to the heart of Jody Reifenberger, who also works at NCHS as a certified physician assistant. (Julie Gallant)

Zangen said she reluctantly traded her military career for a civilian one, in part, to have a more stable home life with her two boys, ages 3 and 6. In Ramona, she has a family support network and

she can fulfill mom duties when her pilot husband, Gert Zangen, is away on medical flights for Rady Children's Hospital-San Diego.

“Sometimes the difference between a helicopter and an ambulance can save a child's life,” said Zangen of her husband's in-demand service. “If you get stuck in traffic with a critical child, that child may not make it.”

Zangen said Gert is a native of Germany who was on an exchange program with the German Navy when they met in San Diego in 2009. He was stationed on Coronado Island while working as an instructor pilot for the U.S. Navy. Now the family speaks German at home and when they're visiting his relatives in Germany.

Those leadership roles Zangen learned in the Air Force now apply to her duties as lead clinician at NCHS in Ramona. She still performs family practice, treating all types of illnesses, and attending to well-child visits, physical exams, and gynecology services.

“We try to keep as many services in Ramona as possible,” said Zangen, who works with all types of patients, from non-insured and privately insured to homeless populations. “We try to be as broad as possible with the treatment that we provide. The nice thing about community health is I feel like I'm helping people in my community.”

Zangen said she would like to take on more leadership roles at NCHS in the future but currently has no desire to become a doctor, which would involve six more years of medical training.

“I'm proud to work for NCHS,” she said. “It's been an honor to provide the care I do for the community. It's a very rewarding job.”

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