

# SIUE alumna makes strides as surgeon

On this week's episode of *Segue*, the radio program that discusses the lives and work of the people of Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, co-host and SIUE Chancellor Randy Pembroke, interviews Theresa Schwartz, MD, breast surgical oncologist at SSM Health Saint Louis University (SLU) Hospital and associate professor of surgery at SLU.

The duo's conversation will air at 9 a.m. this Sunday, Oct. 7, on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound.

An SIUE double alumna, Schwartz earned a bachelor's in biological sciences/medical science in 1999 and a master's in biological science in 2000. She attended SLU for medical school, completed a residency there and went on to accept a fellowship at the University of Michigan. She has worked as a physician and surgeon at the SLU School of Medicine since 2011. Her research focuses on breast cancer, and she is committed to supporting women's health through numerous groups, such as the Show Me

## Segue

Healthy Women's program, The Breakfast Club and the Ghana Collaborative Project.

"You hold bachelor's and master's degrees from SIUE," Pembroke says. "What do you think SIUE provided that was helpful in your preparation for medical school and life beyond?"

"I felt more passion from the professors and instructors that some of my peers who might have attended larger institutions did not," Schwartz mentions. "Those teachers did a great job reaching those students, who were interested in entering a variety of fields, and they loved what they were doing."

"Whenever you are passionate about your job, no matter what it is, it really shows."

For some medical professionals, there may have been a person in their life that inspired them to become a surgeon or enter that particular field of medical research. Schwartz,

however, did not have a similar story.

"My parents were self-made businesspeople, and they built an oil well cementing company from scratch," Schwartz says. "He knows more about physics and geology, and built the company from a plywood table in a basement to having three different locations all with elbow grease!"

"Growing up, I can remember them encouraging me to do enough to be happy every day and to take care of myself. It was never about being a doctor or a surgeon. It was about waking up and loving what I do every day."

"I see that they had a drive to accomplish something, and I certainly see that same drive in you!" Pembroke exclaims. "Based on your current research on aggressive breast cancer biology in African women, what do you theorize to be the cause?"

"We have no idea if there is one 'thing' in particular that is actually prompting this," Schwartz says. "Though we have causality or correlation, we aren't there yet."

"However, most of the research we do is about targeting the cancer when it arrives. Some of the research is even looking at the vaccination or even preventative side, but we're still not making a ton of head-way yet on that end."

"If breast cancer is more aggressive in Africa, does it mean that women are dying of breast cancer more frequently?" Pembroke inquires.

"Unfortunately, yes, and the normal treatments we have are not working," Schwartz answers. "There has to be a missing piece out there somewhere. It is one thing to say in a research paper that we don't have the answers, but to tell a patient that we are unable to help them is a whole different story."

"You have to look her in the eyes, and tell her and her family

that there is nothing we can do to fix this," she continues. "It's hard, but it actually drives me to keep going."

The month of October is National Breast Cancer Awareness Month, an international health awareness campaign intended to raise funds for research into its cause, prevention, diagnosis, treatment and cure, educate people about the importance of early screening, and offer information and support to those affected by breast cancer.

"Beginning at age 40, you get a screening mammogram each year as long as you are healthy or asymptomatic," Schwartz suggests. "The average age of getting breast cancer currently sits at 63, but women in their 40s and 50s are being diagnosed just the same."

To hear more of the duo's conversation, listen to *Segue* at 9 a.m. this Sunday on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound.

*By Madelaine Deardeuff, SIUE Marketing & Communications*

