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Dr. Seth Sullivan balances roles of family man, Brazos County pandemic response leader

Megan Rodriguez

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Eagle photo by Laura McKenzie

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Family time has always been a priority for Dr. Seth Sullivan, according to his wife, Allison.

She distinctly remembers the sounds of his daily arrival home from work when they lived in College Station: the crunch of the gravel as he would park, the car door closing, and then Sullivan's hurried steps as he ran into the house to see his family.

"I was like, 'Guys, I think we should take note of this. I think this is unusual that the husband runs into the house,'" Allison, 42, recalled between laughs. "Not a moment can be wasted."

Today, the two live in Bryan, with five happy, extroverted children: Sylas, 11; Amelia, 9; Blaise, 7; Wren, 6; and 5-year-old Emmanuel, who everyone calls Manny.

The family moved to the Brazos Valley in 2011. Allison, a Houston native, graduated from Texas A&M University in 2001 with an interdisciplinary studies degree.

"We knew that the Bryan-College Station area was the kind of community that we wanted to raise our kids," Sullivan said. "We just love it here."

Prior to COVID-19, Sullivan, 43, already kept a busy schedule treating patients as an infectious disease clinician at Baylor Scott & White. But as the pandemic swept the nation and changed the lives of everyone in its path, Sullivan was no exception.

His position as the Brazos County Health District's alternate health authority suddenly made him the face most people in the county associate with novel coronavirus guidance for the area.

It's a change the family has felt, but one that Sullivan said is manageable, thanks to Allison and the kids being accepting of the circumstances.

"Allison has been amazing," Sullivan said. "And the kids have been very understanding. ... I have a role that is looking at why this is happening and what is the best way to keep our community safe, and I need to concentrate on that role. I've been very blessed with a family that's supportive."

Inspired to serve

Sullivan grew up on a farm in Pella, Iowa, which he recalls jokingly as an experience that confirmed that he wanted a job with heating and air conditioning.

“But it taught me work, to work on a farm, and that was a good start on things,” Sullivan said. “But I always enjoyed science, and I always enjoyed learning, and I was curious about things and how things work.”

Knowing Sullivan’s interests, a high school teacher helped him connect with a surgical team that was going on a mission trip to Haiti. There, he helped in various ways, including translating because he knew some French. Sullivan said that was when he knew that he wanted to pursue a career in medicine.

Sullivan attended the University of Missouri-Kansas City, which has a program that allowed him to graduate with a medical degree within six years. He accepted a Navy scholarship that covered his medical school costs under the condition that he work as a flight surgeon — a doctor who cares for pilots — in the Navy for four years.

He graduated in 2002 and interned through 2003. He then had six months of flight surgery training, and was stationed in Iwakuni, Japan. That’s where he met Allison, who was a special education teacher at a Department of Defense school.

Following his time in Japan, Sullivan went on to complete one more year of his Navy commitment in San Diego. He completed a residency in internal medicine in 2009 and a fellowship in infectious disease in 2011 at the Mayo Clinic College of Medicine and Science in Rochester, Minnesota.

In his role today as infectious disease clinician at the Baylor Scott & White clinic, Sullivan said he sees people with anything infection-related, caring for those who have been discharged from the hospital to make sure they’re recovering from their infections. Among his patients are people with HIV and those who have a fever or illness that cannot be explained. When he treats patients in the hospital, Sullivan helps those who require more intensive monitoring to diagnose an infection and ensure they receive the proper medication.

“It’s a lot of problem-solving, which is what I enjoy about infectious disease,” Sullivan said. “It’s a lot of mystery and trying to solve the mystery. That’s what’s fun about the specialty.”

Love at first sight

Sullivan’s path toward family life was not what he originally envisioned. He thought he would complete his residency and fellowship before settling down, rather than meeting Allison and starting a family in the early stages of his career.

“But God works the way God works,” Sullivan said. “I was not going to lose this one.”

Neither Allison nor Sullivan were looking to go to rural Japan. She thought she could be sent to Europe. The Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts were in full swing in 2004, and Sullivan thought he would be sent to the “tip of the spear.” Instead, he was in a family medicine clinic in Iwakuni, Japan, and treated things like the common cold. Though it wasn’t what either of them expected, the experience led them to each other.

“We joke that we both went halfheartedly,” Allison said, “but came back with a really great souvenir.”

Allison had been in Japan for a year and a half before she first saw Sullivan walk into the Officer’s Club restaurant and bar.

“It was love at first sight,” Sullivan said. “For me, anyway. But the competition was fierce. We were on an airbase in Japan with Marine pilots everywhere.”

“Everywhere,” Allison emphasized. “And I was one of 10 single women. I really had my pick, is just the truth of it. But I knew who I liked.”

Allison remembers the night she met Sullivan well — a friend of his was showing him around the bar. She and Sullivan both noticed each other.

“It was kind of instant chemistry,” Allison said. “It was like a *Friends* episode. Banter back and forth. Really fun. I think we did know pretty quickly.”

The couple flew to Houston in 2005 to have a wedding that their families could attend. They went back to Japan for six more months before moving to San Diego for Sullivan's final year of his four-year commitment to the Navy.

Today, Allison is heavily involved in local Christian ministry work and hosts a faith-based podcast called *Sinner Saint Sister*. She has also authored the book *Rock Paper Scissors*, which is a collection of personal essays that pull from her experience as a Christian. Prior to the pandemic she frequently traveled the country to speak at various ministry events.

Building a home

Hobbies aren't a big priority for Sullivan, he said. Family activities fill up his extra time.

"It's really just these kids," Sullivan said. "Any spare moment I get, I just really want to be with her and those kids. I feel them growing up fast, and so my hobbies are kind of whatever they're doing at the time."

That means involvement in such sports as football, baseball and gymnastics, including coaching some of the kids' teams. In a group interview, the kids said Sullivan has attended all but a handful of their games.

"For me, that's what's been most rewarding out of any free time activity ... to spend it with them," Sullivan said.

When everyone's home, activities include family movie nights and such games as "bike-run," which Amelia said is when they ride their bicycles while Sullivan runs.

Wren said she and her siblings wrestle with Sullivan, but "he doesn't actually try that hard," and opts to tickle them instead.

But the increased intensity of Sullivan's role as alternate health authority means less time for fun and games. Additional duties include press conferences, more interviews with media outlets, daily meetings with local officials about the status of the virus in

the community and late nights studying COVID-19 updates in other counties and countries.

The children talked about the effect it has had. Sylas said it's hard to see his dad tired from work. Amelia said it can be frustrating when she wants to be with him, but said she understands the importance of his job. And even though her father's schedule is stretched, Amelia said she knows he always tries to make time for them.

"He's always there for us when we need him," Amelia said.

Communicating through pandemic

As alternate health authority, Sullivan is accustomed to being interviewed by media outlets. For the past six years, he has appeared monthly on KBTX to discuss health-related issues on the "House Call" segment.

"That's helped me learn and make relationships with our media partners, and to understand the way that it works and how to get better at that over time," Sullivan said.

A health authority, according to the Texas Department of State Health Services website, is a physician appointed to administer state and local laws related to public health. Some duties, according to the website, include enforcing jurisdictional quarantine orders and helping local health departments in disease prevention.

If a health authority is absent, an alternate health authority can take his or her place.

The Brazos County Health Authority is Dr. Eric Wilke, but Sullivan said Wilke was on standby for deployment with the Air Force Reserve — and has since been deployed — when the outbreak began locally, so Sullivan took the lead from the start. Even so, Sullivan said the new duties are ones he likely would have anyway, given his background in infectious diseases and experience working with media outlets.

Health Promotion Manager Sara Mendez, who has worked with Sullivan since he first started at the Health District about eight years ago, said he is "an amazing man" who has a way of putting people at ease during uncertain times.

“He is just very personable and he has that calming voice that makes him the perfect person for this topic,” Mendez said. “I feel like he has the knowledge, and then he has the ability to be able to relay that knowledge to others in a way that they can understand.”

Sullivan credits committed community members and health professionals who supply information, including epidemiologists, business owners and long-term care facility liaisons.

“It has just been a great team effort,” he said.

Home life has changed for the Sullivans throughout the pandemic. But Allison said it’s easy to support her husband through the shift, because she knows that while family is his top priority, the community needs him during this time.

“As a family we get a lot of sympathy texts and phone calls, and people are so generous, bringing over meals,” she said. “But we’re actually doing really, really well. And I think it’s because I know he cares about us supremely, and what he’s doing really, really matters.”

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