

PHOTOGRAPHS: MARK BANGDIN



**left:** "You know, there is so much good about her, the half won't ever be told," says patient and former midwife Carrie Tillman, age 100, about Jean Sumner. **below, left:** "I'm a firm believer that you can practice as good a medicine in Wrightsville as you can in Boston," says Jean, examining the X rays of a town patient.



## The Doctor Is In

Jean Sumner relishes every moment of her life as a small-town doctor—from knowing every patient by name to enjoying the fresh produce they leave on her doorstep.

Jean Sumner had served as the sole doctor in Wrightsville only a short time when the sheriff called her one Thanksgiving morning. Elbow deep in dressing, she listened as the officer said he needed Jean to declare a woman dead.

"Sheriff Tanner, it's Thanksgiving and I'm on my way to my mother's," she said. "I have the dressing. Can't you call the coroner?"

"The coroner's already at his mama's," the sheriff replied. So Jean and the lawman soon pulled up to the deceased woman's home, where some 50 to 70 people milled in the front



yard. The sheriff gently muscled the doctor through the grieving throng. Inside, Jean saw the draped body in a recliner. Nearby, the bereaved sister wailed inconsolably. The doctor

pulled back the sheet.

"This woman is not dead!" shouted Jean, recognizing a diabetic coma. "Get me some sugar!"

The sister stopped crying and stiffened. "The doctor says she can't have sugar," she argued.

"I am a doctor," insisted Jean. With a pocketknife,

the sheriff chiseled off chunks of rock-hard sugar found in a canister. Jean dribbled the sweet paste into the unconscious woman's mouth. After a moment, the patient revived—she

looked positively lively when the ambulance arrived.

As Jean and the sheriff got ready to leave, they found the now silent crowd still gathered outside. "When we walked out the door, it was like the Israelites and the Red Sea," Jean says, laughing at the memory. "The waters parted and you could hear this, 'Ooooooohhhhhh.'"

### Making the Medicine Go Down

Raising the dead falls far from the realm of Jean's everyday repertoire. Typically she deals with more mun-

dane aches and pains, yet the people of Wrightsville and Johnson County still consider the physician a bit of a miracle worker.

A native of neighboring Sandersville and Washington County, the former nurse made the move to Wrightsville with her husband, Joe, when he wanted to open a pharmacy in his hometown. For a time, Jean worked as a nurse at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Dublin. Then she stayed home for six years after the birth of the couple's children, Joseph and Jeannie.

**right:** Flanked by children Jeannie and Joseph and husband Joe, Jean claims she's no superwoman. Her family disagrees. "I don't think she ever sleeps," says Jeannie.

"Working some in the drugstore with Joe, I realized a community without a physician is in trouble," she says. Jean's own family provided much of the health care in her hometown. "My grandfather was a physician, my father was a physician, and my brothers are physicians," she says. "Then I moved to this county with no health care. Poor people, old people, and people who work all day and come home to find their children sick have nobody to call on."

So Jean decided to become the town's doctor. For the next few years, she commuted to Mercer University School of Medicine in Macon. "It's 62.8 miles," she says. At the time, Joseph was 6, and Jeannie was 3. "Motherhood was my best preparation for medical school," Jean says. "You're used to staying up all night and working all day." Joseph, now 25, is in law school at Mercer. Jeannie, 23, recently graduated from Mercer with a degree in environmental science and is now employed in pharmaceutical sales with Ortho McNeil.

Jean graduated with honors and received the Distinguished Graduate Award and the Physicians' Physician Award, given by her peers. Next she completed her residency at the Medical Center of Central Georgia, where she won more recognition as Outstanding Resident in Internal Medicine and Teaching Resident of the Year.

She takes no credit for those long years of training, instead praising family and friends for making it possible. "My husband is a *really* nice guy," she starts off. "My neighbor would come over and put a roast in the oven, and I'd come home to supper. I don't think the orthodontist ever thought my children had parents. My father-in-law took them

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**“Motherhood was my best preparation for medical school.”**

Jean Sumner

the entire time they had braces.

“I had a community behind me,” she continues. “People are very kind in a small town.”

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Jean amply repaid those many kindnesses when she opened her practice in 1990, serving as the county’s only doctor for the next four years. “I was in partnership with my brother [William Rawlings, Jr., a Sandersville physician], so I had some coverage, but nobody was down here [in Johnson County] but me,” she says. They have since enticed two other internists to their practice.

“When you’re a doctor in a small town, you’re a doctor first,” Jean says. “You’re the football doctor because you’re at the games. They get you out of church, they stop you in the grocery store, they come to your home.” Not that she’s complaining. “I personally think it’s an

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**above:** "I commune with my horses in the afternoon when I feed them," Jean says. "The Ohoopsee River is behind my house, so I walk down there and fish."  
**above, right:** Even when Jean leaves the office, the demands of being a small-town doctor continue.

absolute privilege to be in a small town," she says. As if on cue, she's interrupted by a patient, stopping by to drop off some fresh peanuts. "I get hams, chicken, turkey," the doctor says. "One day, there were six watermelons in my car. I get *shucked* corn.



That's what I mean about being in a small town.

"I don't think you can have a more demanding job than that of being a small-town doctor," Jean continues, "but I really don't think you can have a better job."

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## Physician, Heal Thyself

Down-home perks aside, after four years as the county's only on-site physician, the weary doctor knew Wrightsville needed additional personnel. "I asked the Washington County Regional Medical Center in Sandersville to help us write a grant," she says. Mary Eleanor Wickersham, Jean's sister, created the federally funded grant, which enabled a Primary Care Center. Staffed by the Medical College of Georgia, the faculty and students work next door to Jean's practice. Then, Jean says, "We asked some of the specialty physicians in Sandersville, like an orthopedic surgeon, to come down one afternoon a month." A general surgeon and an obstetrician also visit twice a month.

The experience solidified Jean's strong advocacy of rural health issues. The small-town doctor's can-do approach to rural health challenges attracts attention. She received the James Alley Individual Service Award from the Georgia Rural Health Association in 1995, and she was selected for Leadership Georgia in 1997.

"If this county can have good health care, every county in Georgia can have good health care," she insists. "Johnson County is a great place to live—you will not find better people—but in terms of economic development, we're lacking." The decline of agriculture and a sewing industry hit hard by NAFTA have both contributed to the area's financial problems.

"I fully understand and appreciate the need to cut costs in health care," she says. Still, she protests some of the current cost-cutting measures. "Managed care pushes physicians to see more patients and increase their numbers," she says. "But if you can spend time with a patient, you're a better doctor and you spend less money on that patient." When doctors personally know their patients, she says, "You don't have to order a slew of tests."

Jean knows all of her patients by

name—and quite a lot more. "You know who drinks a little bit, you know who has an unhappy marriage," she says. "That background helps you be a good doctor because you can use that to shape the activities in their life and health."

To Jean, the relationship between a doctor and a patient extends beyond prescribing pills and listening to complaints. "People first want to know that you care *about* them," she says. "Then they'll let you care *for* them." **NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON**

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*Jean Sumner*

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