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**Michelle Simi - A Doctor who Makes House Calls Despite Chronic Pain**

By Sophie Braccini



Michelle Simi (right) with her assistant, Kyle Lyall Photo Sophie Braccini

A beautiful blonde with caring blue eyes, Doctor Michelle Simi of Moraga comes across with both warmth and reserve. But beneath her smile is a level of pain she does not show, pain triggered by a rare auto-immune disease called Behçet's Syndrome.

When Simi was first diagnosed with Behçet's nine years ago, she had to abandon her full-time medical practice. But now, after finding a mix of treatment that helped stabilize her condition, she is back practicing medicine the way she wants to, taking the time to see patients as long as needed, and accepting only a limited number of them so she can take care of her family, her health, and her professional life without burning out.

Behçet's is an auto-immune disease like Lupus, but is quite rare. The name Behçet comes from the Turkish physician who first described it, explains Simi, and there are only about 2,000 cases in the United States. The range of the symptoms includes joint pain, fatigue, headaches, night sweats, mouth sores, and even stroke. "There are periods of flare ups and relapses," she explains, "so doctors can just dismiss it or think it is something else."

Simi believes being a physician helped her get a diagnosis relatively quickly, within one and a half years. "I know the system, I knew who to go

see and when to push to get more answers," she says. She underwent six months of aggressive chemotherapy for her condition, and is currently on a less toxic infusion treatment. "It is still an immune suppressant, but not as horrible as the first round of chemo," she says.

One of the turning points for Simi was getting in touch with San Francisco-based physician Mark Reneker who does a lot of research on what she calls "oddlly sick people." Reneker referred her to Petaluma-based physician Brian Bouch who specializes in integrative medicine.

"Dr. Bouch had me tested for gluten allergies," she says. "I tested positive and removed it from my diet. Then I wanted to have a full spectrum done and found out I was also allergic to dairy and salmon, among other things." She says changing her diet has made a huge difference. "That's something I'm trying to stress through the American Autoimmune Related Diseases Association," she says. "Food allergies are a huge contributor to inflammation in the body that may trigger or stimulate the primary disease." After changing her diet Simi dropped 40 lbs, one medication, reduced her Prednisone medication, and has not been to the hospital since.

Simi strongly believes in communicating with associations and getting

the word out to the community. "I've also learned to ask for help," she says. "My husband Todd has been a pillar during all this, and I can always call my parents who live in Alameda."

The Moraga community has been very supportive as well.

"When I had chemotherapy and I was so sick, the parents at my children's school, Los Perales, took turns bringing us dinners." During that time, her son, who was a fifth-grader, made a presentation about the disease to his classmates during Health Week and his teacher, Julie Rudolf, wore the Behçet's Association wrist band.

Now at Joaquin Moraga Intermediate, her older son's core teacher, Robin Anderson, said she would help the family promote a Walk for Behçet's that Simi is planning this September.

For now, Simi's remaining symptom is chronic pain. Besides the medication that she cannot completely avoid, she practices meditation to alleviate the pain. "I practice what is called mindfulness meditation," she says. "It is a focused technique where you get in touch with the pain and blow it out as you exhale. Another way to meditate is to imagine parts of your body and visualize cells getting healthy. The brain recognizes the healthiness."

Simi says that this biofeedback method has been tested with control groups and has shown to be effective. She practices it with some of her patients who suffer from other forms of chronic pain, such as arthritis. "Looking into integrative medicine helped me get my life back," she says. "I'm still sick, but I have good days."

Simi has been able to return to work as a physician, but in a different way: She makes house calls and is taking patients from the three Lamorinda communities.

"I want to do this on my own terms, taking the time to see the patients in their home," she says.

Behçet's Awareness Day is May 20. For more information about Behçet's go to www.Behcets.com.

**Moraga Peace Corps Volunteer Packs for Ethiopia**

By Cathy Dausman

A glance in Rachel Micklas' mirror shows her how close she is to traveling to Africa as a Peace Corps volunteer. Three months ago she covered her bedroom mirror with sticky notes to count down the days until her departure. Now that same mirror is slowly unveiling the face of the 2010 University of Oregon grad who'll fly to Washington D.C. June 4 and then on to Ethiopia.

If all goes well, she'll spend a total of 27 months overseas. Micklas' only other international travel has been a six-month stint in England where she taught pre-school. She's also been a nanny to 15 East Bay families, and feels that her experiences with children will transfer to the work she'll do teaching primary school classes in Ethiopia.

Micklas originally expected to join the Peace Corps in 2010 but a surgery postponed this "new chap-

ter" of her life for two years. So for the second time, the young woman prepares to "see life from a completely new perspective, and gain friendships that will last forever." She will join 1,134 California residents currently serving in the Peace Corps in 139 countries.

What drew this Moraga native to such an altruistic endeavor? It started six years ago. "I met one of my best friends during college orientation," she recalls. "When I met her parents they had so many exciting and intriguing stories about the Peace Corps. I didn't know much about it at the time, but through their explanation, stories, and experiences I knew it was something I wanted to be a part of." She also knew she wanted Africa. Potential Peace Corps volunteers submit a wish list of where they'd like to serve; Micklas' first two choices were Africa. She left her third choice open.

During the first three months, Micklas will live with a host family in Ethiopia to become immersed in the country's language and culture. "I want to master a new language by learning it firsthand in the region it is spoken in," she says. That language might be Amharic, Oromifa or Tigrinya. Micklas won't know until she's actually in the area she'll serve, but her best friend, now in Lesotho, South Africa jokingly assures her that "the Lion King language is real!"

Micklas is unsure what to pack. Since her final destination is uncertain, she won't know whether she'll need warm or cool clothing. She expects there'll be no internet, cable or phone service readily available, but actually enjoys "keeping the post office in business." Micklas will also bring several books for eventual ro-



Rachel Micklas Photo Cathy Dausman

tation in the Peace Corps volunteers' library (*Onward and Little Bee* are two current favorites), arts and craft supplies, perhaps to decorate her own postcards, and a soccer ball since she lettered in soccer at Campolindo High School and also played at University of Oregon.

The Peace Corps (www.peacecorps.gov) has placed more than 200,000 U.S. volunteers in countries since its establishment in 1961. Over 3,085 volunteers have served in Ethiopia; currently 101 volunteers serve there.

Micklas advises those considering joining to be patient with the application process, be honest with yourself, and know specifically what you want to do. "I want to see life from a completely new perspective, and I want to gain friendships that will last forever," she says. "I'm excited for my service in the Peace Corps and can't wait for this new chapter of my life to start."

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**Sunday, May 13<sup>th</sup> 8:30 A.M. - 2:00 P.M.**

<p><b>Buffet Menu</b></p> <p>Champagne, mimosa or fresh orange juice Eggs Benedict Pancakes Oscar Bacon, sausage, home fries Pancakes, French toast, Waffles Omelets made to order <small>(Choice of vegetable, ham, bacon or other omelets)</small> Fresh fruit, Gourmet cheeses, assorted pastries &amp; breads Famous poached pear salad with gorgonzola cheese Carving station with prime rib served with an jus Honey glazed baked ham/Tea smoked salmon Assorted Desserts and Fresh Strawberries</p>	<p><b>Dinner Menu</b> <i>(À la carte)</i></p> <p>4:30 PM - 9:00 PM</p> <p>Salads Prime Rib Filet Mignon Petrole Sole Blackened Salmon Prawn Pasta Beef Stroganoff Pork Schnitzel Veal Marsala Madras Chicken Curry Wine and Desserts</p>
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