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Women of Coast

In Every Issue

- 14 Editor's Letter**
- 32 Click**
Out and about with Childhelp and CASA breaks a million.
- 80 Calendar**
- 81 Books. Read. Must.**
BY DANIELLE BAUTER
- 94 Artistic Vision**
BY JEANNIE DENHOLM



26



17

Current

- 17 Up Close**
Michelle Wulfestieg uses her near-death experiences to help others
BY BRANDI NEAL
- 20 Along the Coast**
CdM get a "fibrary," a corporate campus nears completion, theater at Vanguard and more ...
BY MARTIN A. BROWER
- 22 Driver's Seat**
How to you say "looking good" in English? Range Rover Velar.
BY STEVE IRSAY
- 24 Beauty**
Plastic surgery choices and skincare science top our trends.
BY SHELLEY LEVITT
- 26 Fashion File**
Style is all about telling the story of who you are.
BY JENN TANAKA
- 28 Questionnaire**
Does Nobel Prize laureate Elizabeth Blackburn know the secret to aging well?
BY SAMANTHA DUNN



70

Passions

- 54 The Taste**
A new chef brings fresh creations to Five Crowns.
BY FRIER MCCOLLISTER
- 56 Morsels**
The Quiet Woman's Lynne Campbell speaks.
BY JENN TANAKA
- 58 Liquid Assets**
A drink less ordinary at Pacific Hiway.
BY JENN TANAKA
- 60 Home Tour**
San Juan Capistrano's charms lure a couple away from Laguna Beach.
BY JENNY PETERS
- 70 Now Trending**
Striking patterns brighten rooms.
BY TAE YOON AND WENDY FAWTHROP
- 72 The Great Escape**
The Pendry lights the way in San Diego's Gaslamp District.
BY ANDRÉA R. VAUCHER
- 76 Wish You Were Here**
India's Jaipur delights with exotic tastes, textures and color.
BY SHACHI MEHRA
- 78 First Person**
"Hamilton" touches the heart in unexpected ways.
BY TODD HARMONSON
- 91 Boys to Men**
Kicking kids' fashion up a notch.
BY RALPH PALUMBO

Current

PEOPLE | STYLE | CHATTER

UP CLOSE

Her near-death experience informs Michelle Wulfestieg's work at Southern California Hospice Foundation

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LEONARD ORTIZ

Almost dying taught her about living

BY BRANDI NEAL

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LEONARD ORTIZ

Michelle Wulfestieg, 37, knows a thing or two about second chances. At age 11 she suffered a stroke and was diagnosed with an inoperable brain lesion. By the time she was 14, doctors told her she was unlikely to live to see her 30th birthday. "So at that moment I was really faced with a choice to either feel sorry for myself or to make each day count," Wulfestieg says. "I chose the latter. I excelled in school. I played volleyball for all four years of high school with half of my body paralyzed."

Determined to make the most of her limited time, she traveled the world, from China's Great Wall to the Taj Mahal and an African safari. She also worked with children orphaned by AIDS and at a rape crisis center. "I was searching for my purpose because I knew I was here for a reason." Then, while completing her master's degree in pursuit of a career in hospice, Wulfestieg had a second stroke at age 25. The Bayview Heights resident describes a near-death experience where she was surrounded by light and love.

Though doctors performed surgery and, due to advances in medicine, were able to remove the brain lesion, she was not expected to survive. Despite being aware of everything that was happening around her, she did not have the strength to move her body. Donate Life America was standing by to harvest Wulfestieg's organs when, at the urging of her husband, she summoned all her strength and opened her eyes. Upon returning home to recover, she faced a new challenge.

"I underwent intense speech, occupational and physical therapy to learn how to walk, talk, eat – I was like a toddler all over again," says Wulfestieg, who now has a normal life expectancy. Seven months later she was back at work and is now the executive director of the Southern California Hospice Foundation, fulfilling her desire for both passion and purpose. She also penned the book "All We Have Is Today: A Story of Discovering Purpose" about her experiences.

WHAT ALMOST DYING TAUGHT ME ABOUT

LIVING: When I was recovering, people would come and talk to me, sit with me, give me a little lotion massage. I had this epiphany: Oh, my God, this is what my



Southern California Hospice Foundation executive director Michelle Wulfestieg wrote "All We Have Is Today: A Story of Discovering Purpose."

hospice patients must feel like – weak, wounded, vulnerable. And I thought, wow, the gift of presence is so profound, especially when you're so sick and unable to communicate.

WHY I WROTE A BOOK: I knew I had a story to tell; I felt like a true miracle. People need to know about this; people need to have hope in their lives. And I feel like even at the end of life there is still an opportunity for hope for dignity, comfort and quality of life.

ANOTHER CAREER I WOULD LIKE TO ATTEMPT: Motivational speaker. I love to share my story, inspire people and give them hope, encouragement and motivation.

HOW MY PETS HELP ME: My dog Bear actually came to visit me in the hospital and brought me tremendous comfort. Animals

don't judge. They just love you no matter what. I think pet therapy is such an important part of healing. With hospice we try to encourage pet therapy volunteers to come and visit our patients. They love it.

MY PERFECT DAY: Any day where I can look back and feel like I've accomplished everything on my to-do list, and I was able to meet some of my goals. I feel like that's a great day.

FAVORITE WORD: Productivity.

LEAST-FAVORITE WORD: No.

BEST GETAWAY: Hawaii. I know it sounds cliché, but we love to take our 6-year-old daughter; we usually go once a year and it's magical. We like to sit there, drink mai tais, look at the sunset and completely relax. We also love camping in our Airstream.

MY SANCTUARY: I love getting a facial or a massage. I also love mornings. It's my quiet time before my daughter wakes up, and my husband's already gone to work. I can sit with my cup of coffee and read or do a devotional and just have my space. I also meditate and journal every morning. It's a way to open the mind and soul and let go of some things.

FAVORITE ACTIVITY: I love fishing in Newport Harbor. I love just the quietness of it, being on the water, and sitting with another person to talk about life.

CURRENT OBSESSION: Hospice is my purpose. What I'm really focused on right now is opening Heavenly Homes, an end-of-life-care home for the dying.

RED OR WHITE: I don't really have a preference, but I do know I like good wine. In my wine cellar I probably have a whole case of Silver Oak.

ANGELS OR DODGERS: Definitely Angels. I've worked with them on several occasions to fulfill my patient wishes. They're wonderful.

MY MOTTO: Make each moment count.

MOST ADMIRE: My mom, because she's incredibly strong. My sister has multiple sclerosis, and I have my disability, so she's been through a lot. She's a very strong woman with a positive attitude, and she's always there for us.

PET PEEVE: When people who aren't (disabled) park in handicapped parking. I am very vocal about it. I will go up to them and ask them where their placard is, and tell them they need to move.

WHAT SURPRISES PEOPLE ABOUT ME: I am very persistent. If I have a vision to make something happen, I will pursue that vision until it's accomplished. It took me four and a half years to write my book. I typed it with one hand. I probably sent 200-300 queries (to find an agent) and got rejection letter after rejection letter. But I wouldn't give up because I knew this is a story that needed to be told.

PARTING THOUGHTS: I want people to know that they can do anything they put their minds to. No mountain is too high to climb. ■

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