



Charting Her Own Course

THE BOLD RISE OF
MICHELLE HOWARD

By Julia Barrera
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Although it is early in the morning, Michelle Howard has an incredibly wide grin on her face, gently combing flyaway red hair every now and then as it escapes from her ponytail. Her office is a collage of different decorations. A Philadelphia pride flag, which incorporates black and brown queer representation, is tapped on one side of a moss green cabinet, the other side littered with papers pinned to hexagon-shaped boards. On her left, a massive painting of sunflowers hangs on the wall, and various books of poetry and fiction are stacked on the floor, rising to the perfect height for her to pluck one off to show me. Sounds of other employees murmuring in the background, occasionally

interrupting our conversation, indicate her busy schedule, yet Michelle is relaxed, eagerly offering each response in an enthusiastic, amused tone.

If there is a poster child for wearing many hats, it's Michelle Howard. In her over thirty years in Santa Barbara, she has done everything from canvassing operations and grassroots organizing to founding a university newspaper to becoming the vice president of a software company. In her spare time, she writes science fiction and submits opinion articles to the Huffington Post. During our interview, she mentions several

(cont. page 2)

different poets and theorists ranging from Derrida to Aimé Césaire, all while sending me various links for me to check out.

Now on her seventeenth anniversary of serving as development director at [Wilderness Youth Project](#), a nonprofit dedicated to increasing children's access to nature through school and community programs, Michelle's many unique experiences as both an activist and writer have established her as someone who has consistently charted her own course. By following her own interests, however unorthodox, she has managed to cultivate a successful career where she can exercise her creativity and skills in service to the local community.

Finding Home on a Sailboat

From a young age, Michelle was no stranger to independence. Before she entered the third grade, she had moved no less than thirteen times due to her parents' up-and-coming careers as computer programmers in the 1980s. In various locales from Detroit to England, Michelle would often be left to her own devices, an only child who never stayed in one place long enough to make friends. "I often say I was raised by a pack of wild books," she laughed. Armed with a novel and a wandering spirit, Michelle often took to exploring her natural surroundings for hours on end while her parents were working, finding adventure and wonder among the wild terrain of wherever they were living.

The one constant in her life was Santa Barbara. The city became a home base for the Howards to take weekly trips to whenever they were in California. Being avid sailors, her family frequently brought their sailboat to Santa Barbara harbor on Fridays to sail to Santa Cruz island, where Michelle would ambitiously explore the remote, rocky environment. Their small sailboat not only provided pleasant recreation but also served as a portable home for the Howards to spend summers in.

However, her parents' expanding ambitions eventually led to Michelle carving her own path at the age of seventeen when they departed to sail around the world. Left with her very own sailboat and an acceptance letter to UCSB, she automatically became independent, setting up her MacIntosh computer in her small study space aboard the vessel and readying herself for her college career.

Full Speed Ahead: Michelle's UCSB Years

While she initially chose UCSB because of its proximity to a harbor, Michelle quickly found a charged intellectual and political atmosphere that called to her from the moment she stepped foot on campus in 1992. "I remember UCSB as the place that burned down the bank during the Vietnam war protests," she said enthusiastically. "My perception of my school was really lined up with how I saw myself, it was this vibrant, progressive space." At the time,



the university was undergoing social transformation, with many marginalized students organizing and protesting against social justice issues. Being a young queer woman who had engaged in activism as a high school student, Michelle was eager to make social change wherever she could.

One endeavor, in particular, had the most significant impact on her undergraduate career: [CalPIRG](#). CalPIRG, or California Public Interest Research Group, is a state-based organization that mobilizes citizens to engage in activism and grassroots advocacy, and in Michelle's freshman year, was reforming its UCSB chapter. After talking with CalPIRG's staff organizer, Michelle agreed to be the chair of the chapter and began receiving rigorous training on lobbying and fundraising at the state and federal levels.

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Although it was often called “activist bootcamp,” Michelle loved every second of it. As a member, she traveled all over the United States, including Sacramento and Washington D.C. to learn about grassroots advocacy. Within a year, Michelle was working on canvassing operations for the renewal of the Federal Clean Water Act, fundraising and building an organized effort among voters. In that time, she also got to develop her professional writing skills, creating a distinct style which she deemed “1-800-GetActive” advocacy writing, which was persuasive, concise, and meant to draw in funds.

To supplement her activist interests, Michelle then turned to academia to find where her passions aligned, eventually finding her home within the Black Studies and Feminist Studies departments as a double major. Never having lost her love for reading, Michelle took a special interest in Caribbean and West African women's literature, which not only featured feminist and social justice themes but also had deep connections with nature, just as Michelle had as a child. Nature became a character itself, following more animist religious traditions of the two regions. “There's just a spark in all of that for me,” she gushed. “I think there was a combination of intellectual interest and also finding my people in this world.”



Michelle reveling in the joy of a hike; Image cr. Michelle Howard

As a part of her independent studies, Michelle even taught her own course for undergraduate students, Intro to Caribbean Studies, while also writing for the academic journal *Social Identities*, out of Oxford. However, Michelle found that she intensely disliked her experience writing for *Social Identities*, and made the controversial decision to not go to graduate school after finishing UCSB in 1996. While she at times felt she made the wrong decision, she stuck to her guns and followed her own intuition, determined to find a career that would challenge and interest her.

Adrift in the Search For Purpose

Still living on a sailboat with expenses of \$300 a month, Michelle quickly ran out of money after graduation. As she neared financial rock bottom, a couple of her friends working at a new software startup, in dire need of employees, invited her to work for them. Already a person of many talents, Michelle quickly accepted, figuring she would work for the company, [Yardi Systems](#), for a short period of time before pursuing a more serious career.

While it wasn't exactly her forté, Michelle found Yardi Systems to be an incredibly educational environment in terms of teaching her valuable writing skills. It was a place where she could exercise her creativity through an unexpected medium: technical writing. In her job, she was able to learn about complex scientific terms and translate them into accessible and understandable concepts for the public, which revived her interest in science fiction writing and storytelling. "Having an understanding of technical matters is really valuable," she emphasized. "I want to be able to use that and deploy it because if I'm gonna make any change in the future, it's going to be through worldbuilding."

Michelle stayed with Yardi Systems to embody the archetype of an interpreter for ten years, eventually rising to the position of vice president and growing the company to hundreds of employees. However, her passion for activism came calling in 2004 during the presidential election, and she left her job to work full time on a campaign against George W. Bush. Michelle formed a consulting group called Grassroots Campaigns, which consisted of a few close friends from CalPIRG, and together they organized on-the-ground campaigns in twenty-eight battleground states.



Michelle eagerly looks through her binoculars for a glimpse of wildlife during her hike; Image cr. Michelle Howard

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While she had never felt more invigorated, Michelle's personal life began to ground her to Santa Barbara. In the middle of raising a four-year-old, she decided that she would still pursue social justice work following the election, but through a local source while her child was still young. At the time, three nonprofit organizations were hiring a development director: Pacific Pride, Environmental Defense Center, and Wilderness Youth Project. With all three appealing to her interests, she had an important decision to make.

Wilderness Youth Project and Riding the Wind of Community Magic

Wilderness Youth Project wasn't necessarily Michelle's first choice. Although she grew up around nature, she didn't consider herself a "hippie" who was super in tune with the landscape. However, the position offered more flexibility and a chance to make material change through increasing marginalized children's access to nature. Resolving to stay in the position for only two years, Michelle accepted the job in 2005.

She was immediately faced with a challenge: raising funds to pay her own salary as well as other staff. She was the organization's first development director among staff who had been mostly volunteers a few months prior. Despite facing an uphill battle, Michelle found the task fun and inspiring. She discovered from her career at Yardi Systems that she enjoyed startups because they were similar to the collaborative grassroots organizing she had done in college; it felt good to build something from the ground up.

Within the next couple of months, the organization secured grants for employee salaries, and she then began focusing on the incredibly important task of articulating the organization's brand. Utilizing a combination of different writing styles she had learned over the years, Michelle worked on telling the story of WYP through fundraising and promotional materials. She found intense passion in



Michelle kayaks with friends during a full moon; Image cr. Michelle Howard

capturing the “magic” of WYP’s work through accessible and persuasive language, applying her talent for worldbuilding that had been nurtured by her time doing technical writing.

The challenge of adapting and honing the organization’s narrative to have real impacts on the community was what encouraged Michelle to stay with WYP past her initial two-year timeline. As an activist, she always thought social change could come only in the form of legislation or policy, something that affected a large population of people, but seeing her own personal impact through storytelling for WYP drastically changed her perspective. “Now I know a bunch of...grownups who, to varying degrees, attribute their health and happiness and success in life to their experiences at WYP when they were kids,” she affirmed. “And that has started to count for me as change in a way that I didn’t think it would.”

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The work environment has also been incredibly welcoming and inclusive. WYP encouraged her to “bring her whole self to work,” something that she never had the luxury of doing in other careers. WYP became a place where she could synthesize all of her different passions, build her own position, and even be her own boss due to WYP’s more collaborative leadership structure. “I personally thrived and developed in a way that I might not have had I stayed in anything like a tech company or a normal nonprofit,” she said thoughtfully. “Wilderness Youth Project felt like a collective. And that was a really healthy form of organizing and leadership for me to be part of.”

Staying the Course: Michelle's Vision for the Future

Over the last seventeen years, Michelle has worked tirelessly to pivot Wilderness Youth Project in the best direction, growing its budget from a few thousand dollars to over \$3 million, three-fourths of which is purely fundraised. Now she is ready to stay the course in terms of WYP activity, keeping the organization stable and consistent and allowing it deepen its connections with the community.

In order to achieve this goal, Michelle is currently working to connect WYP with smaller, local nonprofits doing similar work in nature connection. She recently wrote a grant in collaboration with nine other organizations, mostly BIPOC-led, to receive funds through California's Outdoor Equity program, which provides support to nonprofits invested in universal access to nature. While it is unclear if they will actually receive the grant, Michelle emphasizes that forming a close relationship with the other organizations is the most important, enabling WYP to have more accountability and insight as a white-led organization working with underserved communities.

Part of her vision for the future also involves focusing on how she can affect change in a way that is more in line with the organization's collaborative nature. As someone who has always prioritized her desires and voice, Michelle felt driven in her personality to be at the forefront of social change as a proud activist. However, she has now learned that working for so long in a community-oriented organization means being humble enough to let other people lead. "In the process of trying to go about a career of service, I have taken the microphone a lot [from others]," she explained. "And I feel like okay, enough with that. How can I become more in the background...in a role of amplifying other voices?" Now with a new team of development associates, Michelle is working on delegating more

tasks to others, uplifting marginalized voices both inside and outside the organization, and examining her own privilege and power more closely.

At the culmination of years of experience in everything from organizing to creative writing, Michelle still maintains her productive spirit in other facets of her life. In her spare time, she runs a small business called the Write Team that provides writing services for local nonprofits and is also working on a science fiction novel that centers queer and trans characters. Although her activist work remains on hold for now, she has never lost her passion for social justice issues, chief among them Black Lives Matter and environmental inequities.

When I asked what she has taken away from her many careers, she slowly closed her eyes, quiet as if she was meditating. "Writing is the most important thing that one can learn for whatever you're going to do. It's professional interpretation to make our language and communication compelling and accessible. I do appreciate getting to hear the magic and interpret it into something that's more straightforward. I hope that's what I do."



Michelle, somewhere in the backcountry of Santa Barbara;
Image cr. Michelle Howard