

Lives Inspired

What makes a great parent-child relationship? *Style* chatted with several Valley personalities and their parents to find out how they grew up and grew into the dynamic individuals they have become.

By Lisa J. Gotto

THE CALIFORNIA DREAM



The phone rings in Denise Conlin's Allentown home and it's a call from the West Coast. Denise gets a lot of these calls from her daughter Michaela, a beautiful, young actor hopeful to make a career for herself in the entertainment industry. As any mother would be, Denise is concerned for her daughter so far away and so vulnerable to the pitfalls that have stymied many an acting career.

Pilot Season

"It's wicked," says Michaela of what the television industry calls "pilot season." Late winter is typically when any new shows slated for the fall viewing schedule are shot. The introductory episode of a potential new show is called a pilot. Acting hopefuls work through agents to become a cast member of a pilot.

But Michaela, 24, has been down this road before, experiencing her first pilot season in March 2002. This was a fortuitous time for Michaela when she happened to be

the right type at the right time. "So much of this business is luck," says Michaela, who landed a role as Dr. Maggie Yang on the new ABC medical drama, *MD's*. The series began shooting in the summer of 2002. The series was cancelled in the winter of 2003.

Making the situation more difficult this season she said is a decrease in the number of pilots being shot. Recently, she says, the odds of landing a good role on a situation comedy or a drama have decreased due to the popularity of reality TV.

Despite the bad odds, the programming changes and having to spend most of her day in her car driving from one audition to another, Michaela says she can't think of anything she would rather be doing, and tries not to overly concern herself with missed opportunities.

"I'm trying more to embrace the process than worry about the outcome because I love it so much," says Michaela.

Gaining Perspective

Meanwhile, Michaela's mother, Denise, is home in Allentown keeping a scrapbook of Michaela's clippings and a positive attitude about her prospects. She admits at times it is difficult.

"The ups and downs of this career are so horrifying I don't know many people that could do it...you have to have so much endurance," she says.

Denise says she tries to maintain a balance between being supportive and being realistic with her daughter. Advice is there when Michaela needs it, and Denise says they have had the "you should have something else to fall back on" discussion.

"Of course I'm coming at this from a different perspective. I'm a breast cancer survivor," says Denise. She says she has always tried to instill a sense of perspective to Michaela especially when she is down about her career.

Michaela seems to have definitely benefited from this perspective. Michaela, who describes her mother as wise, strong and full of life, says she was 16 when her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. It was her mother's great attitude about it, she says, that kept her from fearing the worst.

"She just seemed like it wasn't really going to stop anything for her," says Michaela of her mother's determination to beat the illness. "Even today, I carry that with me," says Michaela. "She's still standing despite all these horrible things that happened and she does it with a lot of grace."

Staying Connected

A special phone call, or more accurately, a series of phone calls takes place between this mother and daughter every spring on Oscar night, as the two enjoy a shared appreciation of cinema and love to discuss their picks.

Denise recalls a particular Oscar evening when Michaela called her from Manhattan saying she would be watching the awards from the apartment of legendary screen star Lauren Bacall. Michaela promised she would procure some type of memento of the evening for her mother. Denise smiles widely as she produces a small box containing the memento. It is a piece of folded paper. Once unfolded the paper reveals the vote sheet that Lauren Bacall wrote her Oscar picks on and initialed. It is truly one of Denise's prized possessions.

Both women admit to a certain level of superstition when it comes to landing a big role, so Denise says some of their phone conversations are a bit vague. "She won't tell me when she's getting close to something," Michaela says she doesn't want to raise her mom's hopes because she knows how fickle the industry is.

"When I'm standing on the set, I'll call and tell her I got it," says Michaela, who her mother describes as energetic, endearing and funny.

At press time we did not know if any of Michaela's pilot season endeavors paid off with a new role, but rest assured she's not resting on her laurels. Michaela says she's confident there is something out there for her and she will continue to pursue the career she describes as "great and wonderful and awful, all at the same time."