

Treating the Whole Person

Michele Geiger-Bronsky



Several years ago, my friend “Jane” started raving about the woman she referred to as her doctor. “You *like* going to your exams?” we asked suspiciously. “Absolutely!” Jane replied. “It’s like visiting a good friend, a therapist, and a doctor all at once. She’s fantastic.”

Jane’s “doctor” is Michele Geiger-Bronsky, a nurse for over 30 years whose titles and certifications include MSN, RN, APNP, and BC; she is a board-certified family nurse practitioner who has also completed Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner training. After first hearing about Michele from Jane and then other friends, Michele and I started crossing paths in Baileys Harbor, where we both reside, and in some of our local non-profit involvements. (In fact, in 2004, after taking three positive home pregnancy tests but still feeling I needed “official” confirmation, Michele was the person I thought to – and did – call for an appointment rather than my regular provider.) In addition to her other non-profit work, Michele and husband Tom are also founders

of the now infamous Door County Scottie Dog Rally/Parade held each May in Baileys Harbor, an activity that has evolved since 2001 from a one-day event into a non-profit organization raising to date over \$28,000 in support of Scottie-related research and rescue efforts nationally.

Michele and Tom moved to Door County from Southern California in 1997. Before living in California with Tom, Michele lived in Milwaukee – she is a native Wisconsinite. She notes, “Tom and I chose to move to Door County for several reasons. When we first started dating, our first get-away was to Door County. We got married at the White Gull Inn. We came back here to visit 12 of the 13 years we lived in California, almost always in the fall. It was always our hope to relocate here – we never felt as grounded and as peaceful as we did in Door County.”

In California, Michele gained a national reputation directing respiratory nursing services at Long Beach Memorial Medical Center. She

developed a respiratory nursing unit, pulmonary rehabilitation program, and support group, all of which resulted in substantial patient care improvements, significant cost savings, and enduring respect and affection from patients. Upon moving to Door County in 1997, Michele pieced together work – as so many county residents do – including a lengthy stint with Aurora in Manitowoc and assistant inn-keeping duties. Then, in 2000, she became the sole provider for affordable women’s and reproductive health care at the Door County Memorial Hospital-affiliated Open Door Community Health Center, which was established due to the 1999 closure of the local Planned Parenthood clinic.

In January 2003, the reproductive health services at Open Door separated from the hospital, and the Wellness Center of Door County was born. The Wellness Center, where Michele and three others now provide patient services, is a stand-alone non-profit organization dedicated to providing professional, confidential, and affordable reproductive health care services for men and women. Funded through sliding-scale patient fees, private donations, and State of Wisconsin Family Planning grant dollars, the center recently celebrated the beginning of its fifth year of operation. The need for and success of the organization are demonstrated by the recent addition of an extra day of clinic hours to meet community demand.

What makes the Wellness Center unique among medical providers in Door County – really, among medical providers generally – seems to be in

large part due to Michele's convictions, influence, and dedication. Michele and center staff are passionately committed to treating "the whole person," taking the time to establish dynamic connections with patients to help find the "right fit" of medication or other health options. The center's mission, Michele explains, is to "provide affordable, confidential, reproductive and related health care in a manner that respects the dignity and choices of the people we see." Non-judgmental, open, and GLBT-friendly (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender), the center also helps clients enroll in medical assistance programs for which they qualify and sort through the intricacies of their health insurance coverage (or lack thereof) – services most providers do not offer. Michele notes that many women are surprised to find they can qualify for more affordable health care. "Women who pay out-of-pocket for contraception, or are considering the HPV vaccine for themselves or their daughters," Michelle says, "should really explore the affordable options at the Wellness Center. Plus, center patients in general are getting more 'bang for their buck': they receive more time with their health care provider and comprehensive educational services in addition to affordable care."

Michele explains the main problem she sees facing local residents is the "lack of employer-provided health insurance. There is a perception on the part of our visitors and seasonal residents that we are a wealthy area, which is just not the case. I meet so many fabulous people who work very hard year-round just to keep their heads above water here; it's very different than anything I've encountered anywhere else in my lifetime." A more specific problem relates to the actual provision of health care services in a small community: "Confidentiality is an issue, even among the most well-intended practitioners, simply due to our small population and the innumerable interconnections between residents. This is one reason all of the

Wellness Center's 'sensitive' testing is sent out of the county – it provides an extra layer of confidentiality for clients."

Since 2001, Michele has also done volunteer presentations at every public school from Washington Island to Algoma and Luxemburg-Casco on sexually transmitted infections, including signs and symptoms, and the law regarding sexual activities and minors. These sessions reflect Michele's dedication to ensuring provision of medically accurate reproductive health education generally as well as to specific clients. The Wellness Center Board is also beginning a series of "Connection Receptions," which Michele explains are designed to "spread the word across the county about the services we do and do not provide. There seems to be a perception in the community that we provide abortions, which we do not. There also seems to be a perception that the majority of our clients are teenagers, to whom we are handing out birth control willy-nilly. Neither of these perceptions could be farther from the truth: the vast majority of our clients are adults, men and women between the ages of 20 and 70."

Long-term goals for the Wellness Center include continued expansion of services. To make this happen, additional space, staff, and donations are obviously needed. "The architectural plans to expand our Sturgeon Bay building are done, we just need the money to do it!" Michele says. "This expansion would improve our ability to meet general community need, allow us to offer additional services to men – who currently account for slightly more than 15 percent of our clients – and increase our capability to provide services to sexual assault victims." Michele modestly notes, "Clients already come to us from Washington Island and all of mainland Door County, Kewaunee County, and even Green Bay. I think this speaks to the need for affordable reproductive health care services generally, but also to the appreciation clients have for

the manner in which we provide those services."

Asked what particularly inspires her, Michele responds, "The work that we do at the Wellness Center! Helping men and women of all ages to make more responsible choices is the most important work I've done in my career. It doesn't get any better than helping clients have things come together and influencing the choices that they make – whether it's to protect their reproductive ability, choose a tobacco-free lifestyle, or restart an exercise program."



Wellness Center Information

The Wellness Center provides confidential, affordable services to persons with or without medical insurance on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays at its Sturgeon Bay building, 312 N. 5th Avenue. On Tuesdays, Wellness Center staff members provide care in Sister Bay at 275 Smith Drive (across from Scandia Village). Call (920) 746-9444 to arrange an appointment at either location.

Information regarding the Wellness Center and its services may also be found at www.wellnesscenterof-doorcounty.com.

Services provided by the Wellness Center include:

- Hormonal and non-hormonal birth control options
- Free pregnancy testing
- Annual women's health exams, including cervical and breast cancer screening
- STD and HIV testing for males and females
- Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE) services, including emergency contraception
- Administration of Gardasil, the HPV vaccine for females ages 9-26 to reduce cervical cancer risk
- Evaluation and management of common GYN concerns including perimenopause and post-menopause
- Health education counseling, focusing on prevention and wellness