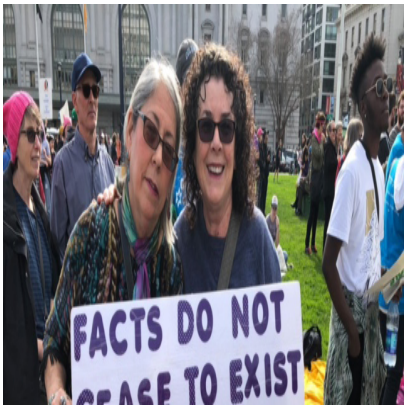


Insatiable curiosity led free spirit to bio-science career, travel, health activism and now, acting online

Description

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A cross-country train trip when she was 9 is a joyful memory for Jane Merschen, one of the few from a difficult childhood.

While her mother, made sleepy by medicine prescribed for mental illness, dozed on the trip from Los Angeles to St. Louis, Merschen happily â??ran around the train, getting kicked out of the smoking and gambling cars, but having a lot of fun,â?• she said.

The journey was a bright spot. Her motherâ??s mental illness and her fatherâ??s refusal to care for her, forced her into a group home for two years until her grandmother agreed to raise her. The specter of inherited mental illness troubled her for years.



One of Merschenâ??s many jobs was as a traveling medical technologist in the Navajo Nation in Monument Valley. (Photo courtesy of Jane Merschen)

Even so, Merschen, now 71, grew up to be independent and free-spirited. She was curious about the world. She traveled widely, studied history and mythology in Greece, and became politically involved in Central America. She never feared to look for new career opportunities.

Keenly interested in public health, she earned several related degrees. She worked as a traveling medical technologist in the Navajo Nation, which covers portions of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah, as well as in hospitals in the Bay Area and Chicago. She concluded her career as a marketing executive in the bio-science technology industry.

Twice divorced with two children, Menschen now lives with her partner in the Outer Mission. Now retired, one of her hobbies is acting in a monthly reader theater on Zoom called â??Drama with Friends .â?• In her latest role, she referees two squabbling gay men in a bar, blowing a whistle for time-outs and making calls like â??False Startâ?• and â??Unsportsmanlike Conduct.â?•

A burden lifted

Merschenâ??s interest in science led to her career, but she started out exploring a variety of interests, jobs, and studies. Soon after moving to San Francisco from Chicago and landing her first job as a medical laboratory technologist at the University of California Childrenâ??s Hospital, she took classes at San Francisco State University in scuba diving, the Holocaust, Spanish, and Greek mythology.

She was so interested in Greek mythology and the history of the fifth century B.C. that she left her job at Childrenâ??s Hospital. â??I bought a one-way ticket to Greece and started studying at The Aegean Institute (now gone), on the island of Poros,â?• Merschen said. She stayed in Greece for six months.

She was in her early 30s, but her fellow students at the institute, she said, were â??twentysomethings, East Coast kids whose wealthy parents sent them to Greece to get a classical education and read Homer in the original â?? which was not my interest. I loved visiting and learning about historical spots like Delphi, Olympia, and Marathon Hill.â?•

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Traveling helped her let go of her feared family legacy. She said it hit her on a trip with a friend she made in Greece. â??I realized I wasnâ??t going to be mentally ill like my mother, that I was going to enjoy life.â?•

Merschen was raised by her parents until she was 5, spent the next two years in a care home for Jewish children, then went back to live with her mother in Los Angeles. But, after a year, her mother was institutionalized â?? until her death â?? and Merschen was sent to live with her maternal grandmother.

â??I was forced to make friends,â?• said Merschen, an only child, â??but I also was good in sports, so there was more opportunity for camaraderie.â?•

She also worked hard in school, she said. She became interested in science when her fourth-grade teacher brought in a pregnant shark to dissect. â??While some kids shrieked and backed away, I was fascinated,â?• she said.

An interest in blood

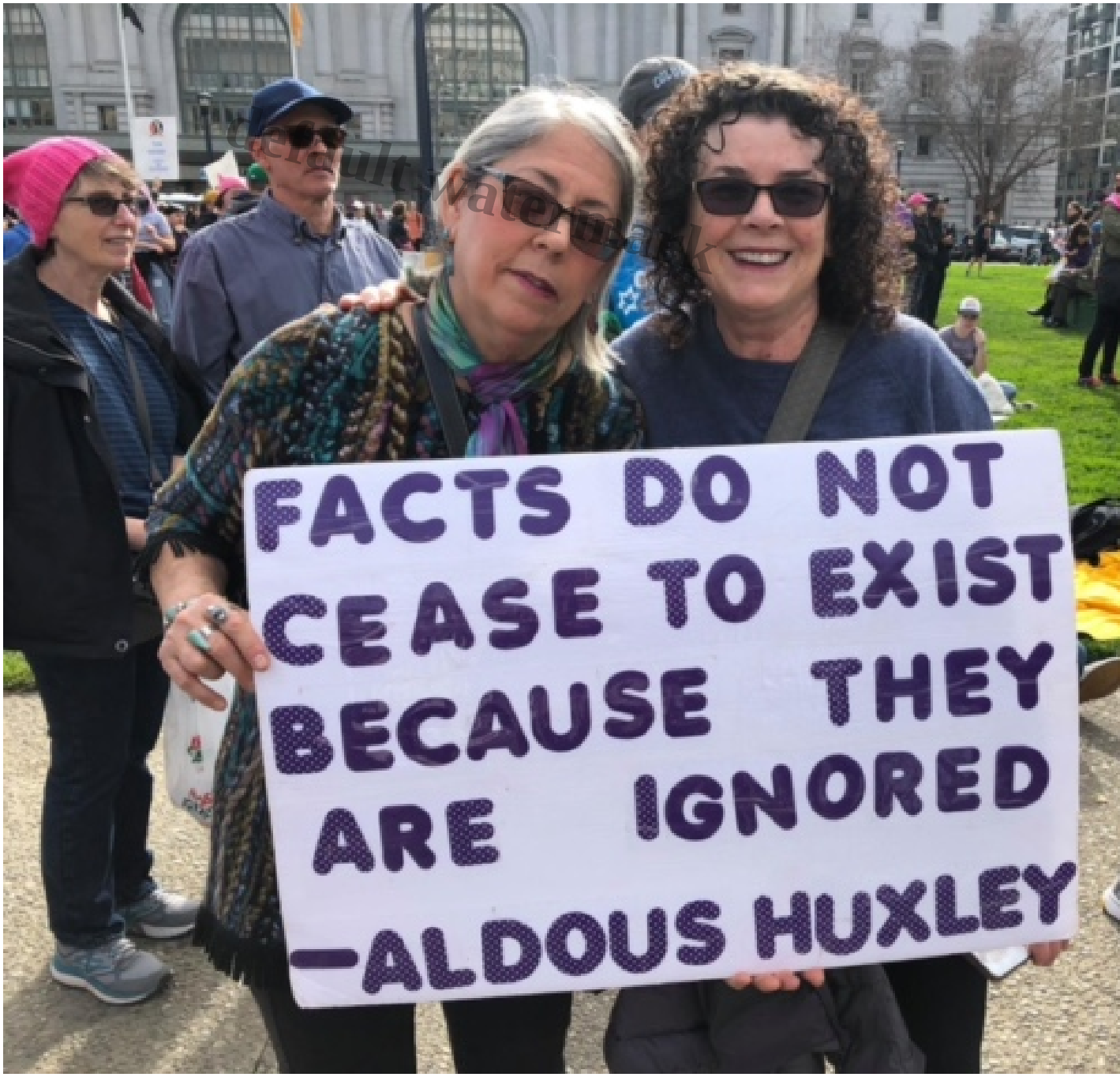
During high school, she saved money for college tuition and a car by working evenings. In 1975, Merschen graduated with a degree in vertebrae zoology from Southern Illinois University. â??I loved animals and considered being a veterinarian,â?• she said.

After graduation, she moved to Chicago and worked as a phlebotomist, drawing blood in hospitals. The work piqued her interest in blood, so she returned to school and earned a degree in medical laboratory technology from the Chicago Medical School .

At 29 and just out of medical school, Merschen left for California with a friend whose family had medical connections in San Francisco. She landed a job at Childrenâ??s Hospital, where she did clinical chemical analysis of electrolytes, liver, and cardiac enzymes**.**

When she returned from Greece, Merschen worked part-time as an emergency lab technician at San Francisco and Marin General Hospitals.

â??In Marin General, I found patients from Central America who had malaria,â?• she said Merschen, whose experience prompted her to volunteer, â??and I was moved to help them in other ways.â?• Merschen volunteered at La Familia, a Bay Area agency that offers a wide range of services to people in financial need.



Merschen, left, at a Womenâ??s March three years ago in front of San Francisco City Hall. (Photo courtesy of Jane Merschen)

â??My high school Spanish was pretty good, and it improved in the classes I took at SFSU, so I was able to communicate, helping people with employment opportunities at La Familia,â?• she said.

Off to Central America

Merschen resigned from Marin General to take a job at Casa Guatemala, a nonprofit in Guatemala City. â??Before I left, I got donations for medical equipment I could bring with me, and I lived and worked in their orphanage as a medical technologist, lab technician,â?• she said.

She then traveled around Central America, sometimes with political groups like now-defunct Committee to Defend Health Rights in Central America. â??I went to Nicaragua with this group where the Sandinistas were helping people with education and medical care,â?• she said.

After seven months, Merschen came back to her apartment in San Francisco and married a man she had met in her Spanish class at SFSU. â??A year later, at 35, I had my beautiful baby girl, Alicia.â?• Her second marriage in 1998 lasted six years.

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In Central America, Merschen said she had seen how â??money dictates what kind of health care one gets.â?• She thought that getting a masterâ??s degree in public health would enable her to do something to change Americaâ??s â??broken health care system.â?•

Pregnant with Alicia, she enrolled at the University of California-Berkeley and earned that degree with an emphasis in biomedical technology. While that didnâ??t lead to a direct involvement in healthcare change, it highlighted a new career opportunity. â??I wanted to get out of the clinical lab and explore other options,â?• she said.

In 1990, having had a second child, a son, Merschen accepted a job with Tosoh BioScience, a Japanese company with a subsidiary in South San Francisco. She also remarried while working there.



Merschen and her partner, Andy Melomet. (Photo courtesy of Jane Merschen)

â??Instead of hands-on, I was talking to people over the telephone in their labs who needed help with our equipment,â?• she said, â??and it was really fun being a trouble-shooter.â?• Eventually, she was invited to switch to the marketing department.

After 10 years, Merschen was recruited by Bio-Rad Laboratories, which makes specialized technological products for the life science research and clinical diagnostics markets. For nine years, she traveled the world doing in-house trainings, lectures and troubleshooting for salespeople for Bio-Radâ??s diabetes testing instruments. â??I loved the job and the travel,â?• she said, â??and it was good for my ego.â?•

She gives credit to her exes for her career success: They cared for the kids when she traveled and shared such parenting duties as school conferences. Her daughter is now a public defender in Arizona, her son a safety engineer in New Jersey.

Despite a recent fall down her front steps. from which sheâ??s recovering, sheâ??s planning a trip to Arches National Park, Canyonlands, and Monument Valley in early April with three women friends.

Category

1. All Posts

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