

Up in the air: D.C. resident spends her 20s touring the world on a trapeze.

WASHINGTON - Taking one year off between high school and college was all that Kaely Michels-Gualtieri planned on. After graduating from The Field School in Northwest 11 D.C., the Capitol Hill resident was accepted to Wellesley College to study engineering. However, instead of heading up to Massachusetts, Michels-Gualtieri followed a time-sensitive passion that took her halfway around the world -- and several feet in the air.

Since she could walk, Michels-Gualtieri was involved in gymnastics. She started with lessons at the YMCA Woodmont Center in Arlington, Va., before moving to the Arlington Aerials in Shirlington, Va. By the time Michels-Gualtieri reached high school, she was a competitive gymnast. But a two-week period in February 2005 opened the eyes -- and the options -- of the sophomore student. According to Michels-Gualtieri, the Field School shuts its doors for 10 days every February and forces its students to get a job or an internship.

"I told my mom I didn't want anything boring because I worked in a hospital and ended up photocopying for two weeks and it was awful," says Michels-Gualtieri, who is now 23. As a joke, Michels-Gualtieri's mom suggested she join the circus to keep from being bored. "And then we were like, 'That's a brilliant idea,'" Michels-Gualtieri says. The next thing she knew, she and her mom were calling up circus schools, but they didn't have any luck finding a circus school with an internship program. Her creative internship plan was sidetabled for a year, but during Michels-Gualtieri's junior year of high school, she spent her two weeks at a circus school in San Francisco.

Before this journey, Michels-Gualtieri spent the majority of her time competing on the ground. Being in the air was not only a new feeling -- it was something she had to get used to. "In gymnastics you flip and you tumble and you're on the bars, but that's never higher than 10 feet. In trapeze I work at 30 and 40 feet," Michels-Gualtieri says.

"There's so much adrenaline pumping through your system." She was hooked. After graduating, Michels-Gualtieri decided on a gap year, or a year off between high school and college. Her reason? She wanted to attend a circus school for a year, tops. "I went and it was just supposed to be a one year thing, and then it turned into a career," says Michels-Gualtieri, who did her gap year at a school in Torino, Italy.



Michels-Gualtieri decided to take a year off between high school and college. Her reason? She wanted to attend a circus school for a year, tops. But that year turned into a career. (Courtesy Kaely Michels-Gualtieri)

After about seven months in Italy, Michels-Gualtieri applied to the Académie Fratellini in Paris. She was accepted into the school and was the program's first American student. There, her typical day started at 9 a.m. and was filled with various classes, from dance and acrobatics and theatre and individual training. While the training was rigorous, Michels-Gualtieri says having a gymnastics background made the transition easy. However, deciding what to do with the future of her education didn't come as easy as her trapeze ability.

"Once I got accepted into (Fratellini), I asked Wellesley for a second year deferral," Michels-Gualtieri says. The admission's office told her to reapply when she is ready to come back. "I fully intend on going back to school in a couple of years when I am done with this career," says Michels-Gualtieri, who currently has a performing contract with *Cirque Italia*, a show that is touring the East Coast this summer. It includes stops in Manassas, Gaithersburg and the Baltimore area.

According to Michels-Gualtieri, the career of a trapeze artist has a shelf life. "I'll probably start peaking out in a few years," Michels-Gualtieri says. She explains that most trapeze artists perform on the trapeze through their late 20s, and then switch to a different discipline in circus that is not as hard on the body.

For this summer, Michels-Gualtieri's life revolves around a caravan, an hour or so of hair and makeup, a performance that features a water stage and numerous cables, cords and bungees. While Michels-Gualtieri is very aware of the dangers of the industry, she says she and her family don't dwell on fear.

"The way that the trapeze is set up, literally everything has to go wrong for you to really get hurt," she says, explaining that she is attached to a safety harness and a bungee, which prevent her from hitting the floor. "For something that is supposed to be incredibly dangerous, it is really not," she says. "As long as you know what you are doing up there and you know how to set it up." In mid-August, she is packing her bags and heading to South America, where she will perform synchronized trapeze with a show in Chile and Peru. "It's going to be awesome."

They have acts from all over the world, so there are acts from China, there are acts from Russia, there's a contortion act from Africa," says Michels-Gualtieri, who adds that the show will hit 23 cities in 10 weeks. When she gets back, she's looking at potential contracts in Switzerland and Austria, among others. But for now, she's enjoying being close to home. "That's the sort of funny thing," she says. "I trained in Europe for years and performed in Europe and my first real job is in my backyard. What are the chances of that happening?"