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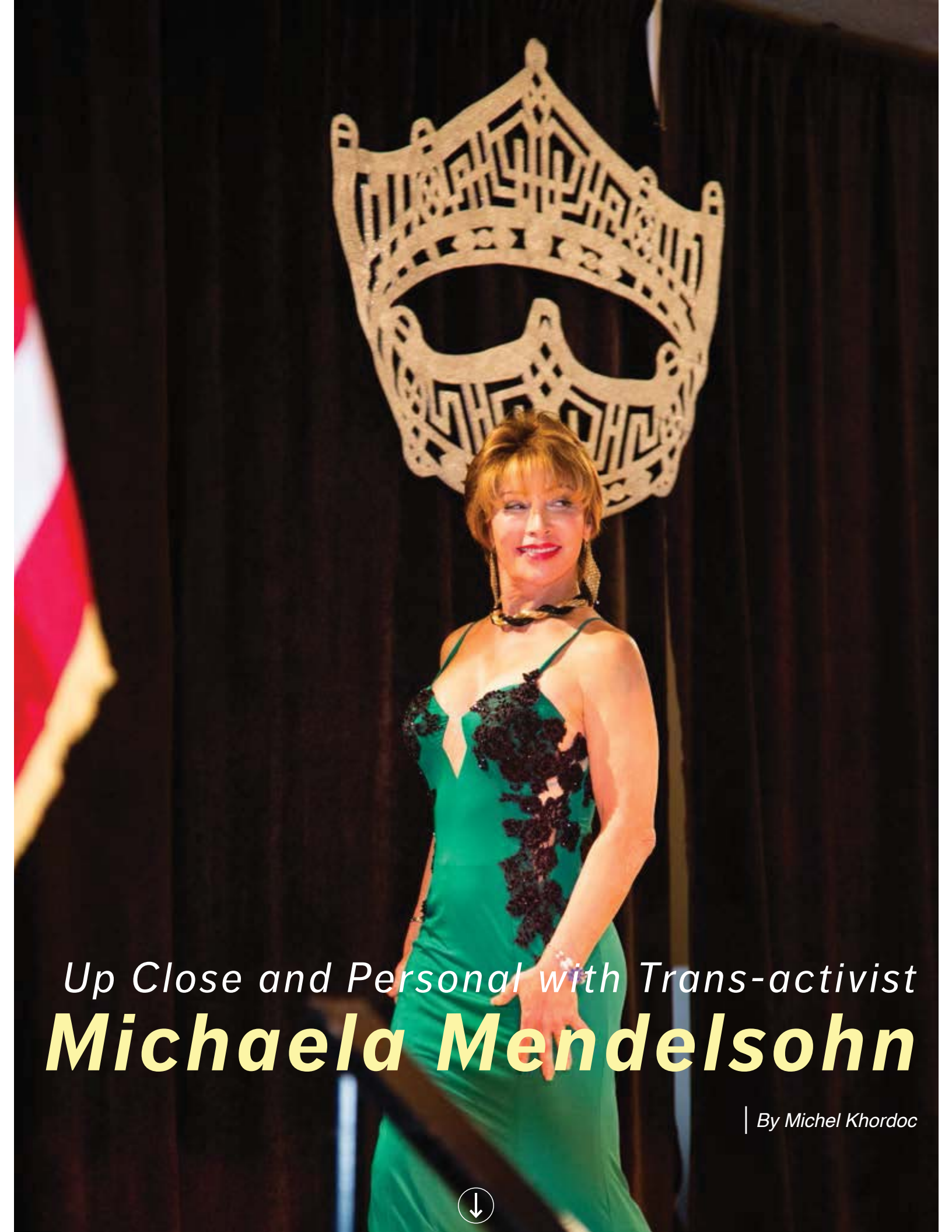
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Up Close and Personal with Trans-activist
Michaela Mendelsohn

| *By Michel Khordoc*





After competing in the Ms. Senior California Pageant and serving as a consultant to Jenji Kohan in the development of Laverne Cox's character on "Orange is the New Black," most people would be content to rest on their laurels. But not Michaela Mendelsohn. This beauty dove right in to the important mission of making a difference in and for the transgender community.

A transgender activist, public speaker and businesswoman with over 40 years of entrepreneurial leadership experience, Michaela Mendelsohn is the CEO of Pollo West Corp - one of the largest franchisees for El Pollo Loco restaurant in the Western Region of the United States - and the founder of the California Transgender Workplace Program to promote transgender employment opportunities.

She passionately advocates for

working transwomen through her efforts with various California trade associations. Her personal mission is to help transwomen find employment, social acceptance and a path to raise families of their own.

Keeping our youth safe is also on her busy agenda as she recently joined the board of the Trevor Project. Michaela is focused on outreach to youth, speaking on issues specific to the transgender community and informing the community about the work of Trevor.

Michaela was born in New York City, and moved to Southern California as a child, where she has lived since. She was married for over 30 years and is the proud parent of three, grown children. In 2008, she legally changed her name to Michaela Irvi Mendelsohn and her gender to female. She now lives with her partner, Carmel and their two-year old son.

An incredible woman, to say the least, LN is beyond honored to meet

Michaela.

Congratulations on joining the board of the Trevor Project.

Can you tell us a little about how this partnership came about?

I received a call about 8 months ago from the Trevor CEO, Abbe Land. I had been referred to her by an associate at the LALGBT Center. I met with Abbe and was subsequently interviewed by several members of the Board and staff.

It was quite an in depth process. With each interview I learned more about their impressive organization. I think it says a lot, how thorough they are in whom they bring onto their board.

As a transgender how do you hope to help The Trevor Project's mission? What message do you hope to convey?

They do have TG staff members and volunteers and have devoted considerable efforts over time to the issues faced by trans youth. I am please to be their liaison to the





trans community. It is a weighty responsibility, which I gladly embrace.

You've completed intense weeks in Trevor's 40 hour crisis training. Can you talk to us briefly about that experience and what the program consists of?

Intense indeed! I am so honored to be a part of this process. I volunteered for the training as I felt it was important for me to fully embrace the core of Trevor's work. I wasn't prepared for what was the start of a truly life changing experience. Along with 17 other volunteers, I spent 40 hours in just 9 days with a talented group of dedicated counselors and trainers.

Saving lives is taken very seriously

at Trevor, as it should be. Their training is based on sound practices and research in accordance with National Suicide protocols. The 'Class of 32' as we are called, became very close knit as we opened ourselves up to the immense responsibility we were about to take on. I was impressed that they had attracted such a quality group of talented, creative loving individuals who were willing to give so much of themselves to the cause of helping LGBT youth in crisis. They have a thorough on boarding process to make sure their volunteers are right for this kind of work.

How has that transformed you? Is there a specific story you can share that has particularly moved you?

As part of the 40 hours I did six role-plays with experienced counselors. The counselors use actual case histories and act as the caller. During my sixth role-play I had a caller who was ready to complete suicide and had the means at hand. Their partner had done so the day before. She was calling not so much to ask for help as to not be alone and to make certain her story got told to her parents. The forty hours of training had provided the tools I needed to validate this caller's feelings of pain and hopelessness and do what was needed to save her life. I was crying throughout the call but could not let her know.

Trevor is all about suicide prevention for LGBT youth. Do you think the transgender community





is the most affected group when it comes to suicide attempts? And what would you attribute that factor to? Bullying? Depression?

There continues to be a crisis for the entire spectrum of LGBT youth. A disproportionate amount of high-risk calls does come from trans youth. They face a different set of triggers largely caused by their personal experiences with gender dysphoria and how others treat them.

Last year Caitlin Jenner made a very loud and public coming out, revealing her transitioning from man to woman, do you think the amount of publicity garnered by Jenner benefited the overall transgender community?

Her very public story along with others has helped the TG community

come further out into the open, which is a great thing. This is true not only for the issues still to be resolved but also in highlighting the success stories of people living successful, joyous lives as their true and authentic selves.

Before Jenner, Laverne Cox was already receiving some amazing media attention for her role on OITNB. You've consulted with Jenji Kohan on the development of Cox's character on the Netflix hit show; what was that collaboration like? Can you give us insights into your contribution?

It was great fun and a real treat for me. One of her writers was an acquaintance of mine and reached out to me at her request. I spent several hours at their offices in The Johnny Carson building

at Universal Studios. She had led writers there and for several hours I answered their questions and offered insights into various aspects of the TG experience. I also spent time on the phone with the writer who was later assigned to the development of the Laverne Cox character. The info appeared to be instrumental into building the backstory of the character.

I did not ask for credits for my consulting, instead I made two requests. First that they get the story right and second that they hire a trans-actress for the role. To my greatest pleasure, they did both. The TG community as a whole, I'm sure is appreciative to Jenji and Laverne. It was one of the few times this had been done and helped us so much as a community.



With the majority of the media zooming in on the transgender community and with TV shows focusing on transgenders whether as leading characters or supporting roles, do you think the “T” in LGBTQ is now more accepted and facing less discrimination?

In other word are transgenders now part of the new normal or not quite yet?

Yes and no. As I said before, it pulled the covers off. But there have been consequences. So much internalized homophobia/transphobia exists in this country. The rate of violence against our community and suicide rates are at an all time high. Trans people are twice as likely to live in poverty. All of this is especially true of trans people of color.

What other progress do you wish to see happen for your community?

My dream is that in my lifetime I see the TG community reaching a level playing field on a socio-economic level. This needs to translate into opening up the narrow view too many of us still face, of day to day survival. I will be excited when it is the norm to see the broad spectrum of trans people living fulfilling lives raising families of their own.

You’ve founded the California Transgender Workplace Program to promote trans-friendly job conditions. How does that work?

Can you elaborate a bit on the program and how it is implemented?

Though the increased exposure and fine work by major LGBT based groups is improving the lives of the

community, it is not reaching down fast enough to many who are in the most need, most notably to trans people of color. This is the niche I most want to help through my work with CTWP.

We are currently working with the California Restaurant Association on a pilot project of “workplace diversity” for trans people. These entry-level service positions with room for advancement into management are key. They put us front-and-center with the public for “all our lights to shine.” We are working with our contacts in the hotel industry as our next working group.

I have been CEO of a restaurant group the last 29 years. We have hired a number of trans employees, four of which have successfully made the move into management. A number of them experienced negative working environments prior to coming to us. They are now shining stars in our organization. We get so many customers calling in to compliment them!

Overall what do you hope your legacy to the transgender community will be?

I don’t really think in terms of a legacy but more in terms of dreams and goals.

And my dream is to see, sooner rather than later, the dreams of the community come true. I would also like my four children to be proud of what I have accomplished. I wish to be a positive role model for them.

You’re quite an inspiration for many us - always working to make a

difference in and for the community. Who was your role model and what inspires you everyday to keep going?

So many people have done far more than I could ever accomplish. I just follow their examples.

What are some of the upcoming projects you’re working on?

We are working on bringing the first TG Convention to Los Angeles. TransConLA is set to be held at the Universal Hilton in April of 2017. I am acting as Board Chair and Strategic Planning Partner. It is shaping into what should be a truly spectacular conference. Important national and international LGBT organizations have expressed interest in the planning process. Youth, labor, education and politics will be the mainstay of our strategic agenda.

We have Hollywood studios interested as well. We will be giving them a chance to showcase their trans positive projects. I am excited to be part of this event, which will move forward the agenda of our community.

What is the one question I haven’t asked you and you wish I had?

Just that I’d at times like to take the emphasis off us trans people and on to our families who have supported us through our transitions. It is not an easy road for them.

Follow her at: @MichaelaIvri

Watch her reel: <https://youtu.be/7d2RbnL-GM4>

