

# Family practice

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## A mother of two at 16, Julie Vails became a doctor dedicated to personal care

Most of the other kids at her San Francisco grade school arrived each morning in a long black limousine, a shiny Volvo or a sporty Jaguar.

Not Julie Vails. Julie, the smart girl with the scholarship, rode the city bus from her family's apartment in the Haight to her classes in tony Sealcliff.

Julie noticed the fancy cars and the respect that seemed to come with having one. One day, she decided, she would get rich and buy one for herself.

At 14, she got pregnant. At 16, she married and had her second child. At 19, she was divorced and standing in line for free cheese to feed her family. But she never forgot about those cars.

In a spectacular leap of faith, Vails decided to become a doctor.

Now, after a monumental struggle, she has the medical practice, and the prestige, and the admiration of her patients, who are treated to hourlong office visits, night appointments and even the occasional house call. But the money and the car will have to wait.

"I'm really broke," says Vails, 34, a family practitioner who for now has decided to sacrifice a big salary to do things her way. Opening her Elk Grove office put her in serious debt, reimbursement rates from insurance companies are generally abysmal, and she is still paying off \$150,000 in college loans.

On a shelf in her office, amid books with titles such as "The Art of Caring" and "Business for Beginners," a toy BMW Z8 sports car taunts her.

"My dream car," she says with a smile.

Vails, a single mom with daughters ages 19, 17 and 4, drives a minivan.

But oh, how far Vails has come.

Her amazing journey began in New York, in the impoverished housing projects of Harlem. Vails has never met her biological father, who left her mother, Debra Vails Qualters, before Julie was born.

The girl was 8 months old when her mother brought her across the country to the Bay Area and enrolled in college. "I studied and studied and studied, and Julie was at my feet the whole time," Qualters says. They got a cheap apartment in the Haight and accepted financial help where they could find it. They got by, sometimes just barely.

Vails was outgoing and "a bit on the sassy side," her mother says. As a young child, she got some modeling and acting gigs and made friends easily. But her family's struggles never escaped her.

"She understood a lot," says Qualters, who went on to marry, have a second child, earn three degrees and work as a nurse in San Francisco. "She grew up watching me slip around and land on my feet again. In a quiet way, I may have shown her that I would accept nothing but her best effort."

At age 6, Vails aced tests for admittance into San Francisco's Katherine Delmar Burke School, a rigorous academic institution favored by the area's wealthy and elite. Vails, whose mother is African American and whose father is white, recalls being one of only three students of color at the school.

"These kids had servants and drivers and got picked up in limousines," Vails says. Many of their parents, she recalls, were well-known doctors or



politicians. "They rode horses and went skiing, things I had never done. They knew nothing about bus passes or welfare."

Vails spent most summers in a very different environment, back in Harlem with her grandmother Louise and numerous aunts, uncles and cousins. "I saw both worlds," she says, "and it worked out OK. I learned that money doesn't necessarily make you a nice person, but that it sure makes life easier."

While she was in the ninth grade and a student at the Urban School of San Francisco, Vails got pregnant and left her mother's home. For a while, she worked as an au pair for a prominent family. Over the next few years she got married, had a second daughter, got her high school diploma and worked various jobs from pizza tosser to employment specialist.

"We had a cute little life, and I was very happy for a while," Vails says.

**Vails greets 4-month-old Brayden Hawkins, whom she delivered, during an office checkup. Vails went through medical school while caring for her own young children.**

At 19, her marriage ended and her lifestyle changed. She learned to stretch her \$599 monthly welfare check by standing in food lines, shopping at garage sales and enrolling her children in subsidized preschools. She attended Solano Community College for two years, then got accepted to Mills College in Oakland.

"I was very good in the sciences," she says. "So I decided I was going to become a doctor, because it was a good job and I would never have to ask anyone for money again. I wanted physical comforts that my family and I never had. I wanted a great car. I wanted respect."

# Doctor: 100-hour weeks while pregnant with third child

She took classes during the day, when her children were in school. "Then I came home and parented, helped them with their homework, fed them, did the dishes, cleaned the house." After putting the girls to bed, she studied, sometimes until 2 or 3 in the morning. It was a cycle she would follow for more than a decade.

"There were nights when all of my friends were out drinking and partying ... and they would call me," she said. "I would cry sometimes, because I wanted to play. But I was willing to say no. I wasn't about to give up."

After graduating from Mills, Vails applied to the nation's top medical schools and was accepted by most, including Harvard, she says. But Harvard had no family housing on campus, so she elected to pursue her medical degree at the University of California, San Francisco.

Close friends like Jamillah Jones never doubted she would succeed.

"Things were pretty rough for her at times," says Jones. "But Julie is not the sort of person to become a victim. She loves to conquer things. She loves a challenge."

Residency was perhaps her biggest challenge. During her first, grueling year as a doctor in training at UC Davis Medical Center, where she routinely worked 100 hours per week, Vails gave birth to her third baby. She hired a nanny to help care for her kids. At her lowest moments she leaned on her close friends, as well as her mother and her stepfather, James Qualters.

Her oldest daughter, Genevieve, who now manages her mother's office, looks back on that period with some sadness.

"I give my mom a lot of credit for what she has accomplished, and what she has given to us," she says. "She has always been strict, very much a disciplinarian. She made sure we went to the best schools and got the best grades." But she and her sister Gabrielle felt cheated by the amount of time their mother spent at school and the hospital.

"My mom is definitely a role model in some



**Dr. Julie Vails is flanked by two of her daughters, Genevieve Vails-Dobson, 19, who works as her office manager, and 4-year-old Isabella Vails.**

ways," she says. "I'm proud of what she has accomplished. But when I was younger, I was constantly wishing I could spend more time with her. I do not think it's a great idea to have children when you're in medical school."

**T**oday the Vails children, including Isabella, 4, are fixtures at their mother's Elk Grove office. Isabella, energetic and precocious, spends most Monday and Wednesday nights entertaining patients and playing in the gaily decorated children's exam room.

Vails opened her office in a fit of frustration over the state of the medical system. After completing her residency, she worked in emergency rooms and urgent-care centers in the Sacramento area and quickly became discouraged.

"Patients spent so much time complaining about the fact that their doctors had no time for them, that they never listened to them, that the staff was rude," she says. Administrators encouraged her to spend less time examining and treating people, to

boost the bottom line. She worked long hours and made big bucks but was unhappy.

"It was all about numbers," Vails says. "I could not give good care, and I hated it."

So, 14 months ago, she borrowed money and opened Vails Family Practice in a storefront off Laguna Boulevard. With an emphasis on wellness, Vails encourages entire families to come to appointments.

She spends a minimum of one hour on each initial visit and at least 30 minutes on subsequent ones. She offers patients gowns made from cloth, not paper, and always has warm pots of coffee and tea in the lobby. She sees patients at night and on weekends, and occasionally in their homes and offices. An independent physician affiliated with Sutter and Methodist hospitals, Vails places an emphasis on obstetrics, pediatrics and family care and sees no patients older than 55.

"I think I'm doing things the right way," she says.

So far, that philosophy has added up to red ink. Vails is building her patient base and launching new services that might some day earn a profit, but she says she has yet to draw a paycheck.

But her patients seem to appreciate her efforts.

"The thing that she gives you is time," says Glyndale Matthews, who during a recent appointment invited Vails to her wedding. Vails greets patients as friends and looks deeply into their eyes when she talks to them. She asks about their families, their work and the milestone events in their lives. "She is sincere and caring, and she looks at you as a whole person," says Matthews. "You walk away just knowing that you're going to feel better."

While never hesitating to hug a patient or hold her hand, Vails also can be brutally blunt. During her first encounter with the doctor for treatment of her chronic, disabling migraine headaches, Amber Schrader was shocked when Vails looked at her prescription drug history and called her an addict.

"I was taking 32 different medications, I was seeing the best neurologists around, and I was still in horrible pain," Schrader says. "She was like a rabid dog. She said, 'You are an addict. I am not giving you any drugs. But I'm not going to leave you hanging, either. I'm going to make you better.'"

Vails spent three hours with Schrader and her partner that day. She concluded that one of Schrader's medications was causing a toxic reaction that was worsening her pain. Vails weaned Schrader off most of her medications, and within two months she was back at work and far more comfortable.

"She is my hero, and she has given me my life back," says Schrader. "Every holiday I send her a card, thanking her for my life."

For now, at least, such praise is the doctor's highest reward.