

SAINT MARY'S SCHOOL

Alumnae Profile

Michaela Idhammar Ketpura '00

Executive Director

Aspen Youth Center, Aspen, CO

Michaela Idhammar Ketpura '00 was born in Stockholm, Sweden, the daughter of Christer Idhammar and the late Christina Idhammar. She grew up with older brothers, Torbjörn and Tobias, and a younger sister, Karin. Today, she is the Executive Director of the Aspen Youth Center in Aspen, Colorado, and is married to architect Nick Ketpura. The two share a three-year-old daughter, Sylvie, and a very large, 150-pound Rhodesian Ridgeback named Julius.

From Sweden to Saint Mary's

Michaela Idhammar's family emigrated to the U.S. when she was five year's old. Her father, Christer, relocated the family to the Raleigh-area to open a U.S.-based branch of his successful company Idhammar Konsult AB. Today, Christer continues to serve as founder and vice president for the re-named firm, IDCON, Inc., and Michaela's brother Tor serves as President.

Growing up in Raleigh, Michaela attended several Wake County public schools: North Ridge Elementary, Lynn Road Elementary, and later West Millbrook Middle. "As a child, I became interested in swimming, and I started competing at the age of five. My mom saw I needed to have more time dedicated to practices and honing my skills, which was difficult while attending public school," Michaela shares.

As longtime Raleigh residents, the family became familiar with Saint Mary's, which at the time was both a four-year high school and a junior college.

"Their high school schedule aligned with the college schedule, so we knew it would be more conducive to my practice needs and I could compete on the Saint Mary's swim team," Michaela explains. So, she enrolled as a freshman in 1996 and was on the very first state championship swim team at Saint Mary's. "All four years, I was able to have a private coach come to Saint Mary's during my lunch period for lessons, and then I practiced before and after school every day with the SMS team or my year-round team."

Michaela received All-American Consideration for swimming and was active as a member of Beacon and nominated as Secretary in her junior year. "Because it was also a college, our clubs and 'secret' societies had lots of funny initiation rituals, like: 'knock on this door at 10:23 p.m.' or 'make up a song about this club' and sing it. We had groups called the Undatettes, the Spiders, MAPs, and others," she says. "As member of Beacon, Megan Cox Gonzalez '00, Campbell McMillan '00 and I were nominated as Beacon leadership in our junior years. When we were seniors, we selected the remainder of our group from our class. At the end of senior year, we selected the leadership for the class of 2001 Beacon. I also was honored to serve as a Marshal and a prefect."

Reflecting on her time at Saint Mary's, Michaela says she loved the history and tradition she found there. "I became a big history dork, so much so that I also got a secondary degree in World War II American History when I went to college," she says. "I know... that's really specific! But, I come from a family of engineers, and the traditions like attending Chapel, singing the school hymn, walking through the Grove and Smedes Building, being a Marshal and watching the dropping of the handkerchief really connected me to this place."

Saint Mary's was also where she met her best friend, Anna Mack Hardison Severn '00.

"Our friendship has lasted all these years," Michaela shares. "We were suitemates in college at Carolina after Saint Mary's, in each other's weddings, started a business together, traveled together, and continue to see each other whenever we can."

Global Experiences Lead to Finding a Passion

While at Carolina, Michaela took an extra semester and graduated in December 2004 with bachelor's degrees in Journalism and Mass Communication, Visual Communications, Graphic Design and Photo Journalism, and with a secondary WWII American History degree. "I love learning, and if someone would just pay me for that to be my job, I'd keep taking classes!"



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Instead, Michaela began working toward becoming a creative director for a magazine. "I was really good at setting up the photo shoots to get the shot that's 'just right' and at photo editing," she explains. "So, my studies centered on moving in that direction."

During her college years, Michaela was also a Fulbright Interactive Multimedia Programme Scholar and lived in South Africa for one summer with classmates from Carolina. "I created a website that focused on the 10-year anniversary of the end of Apartheid. I was deeply interested in how life had – or had not – changed for the people of South Africa, their stories and their struggles. I began to think more deeply about how I could affect change or 'do the good' that needs to be done without thinking I had all the answers. I just asked the question – what can I do?"

The following summer she interned with National Geographic's *Adventure Magazine* in New York City. "During this time, I realized that magazines and newspapers were on the decline, so becoming a magazine's creative director might not be in my best interest as a career. And, I had felt the beginnings of a calling to nonprofit work after being in South Africa. I knew I had to follow my heart."

After graduating from Carolina, Michaela decided to take a job with an NGO in Peru. "My dad was not keen on the idea," she explains. "Although he'd worked for the U.N. before I was born and was philanthropic and globally-minded, as a dad it was hard for him. But, I was determined to go, and I said, 'I'm going to make it happen.' So, off to the Sacred Valley outside of Cusco I went."

Michaela says that Urubamba (an hour outside of Cusco) is in the Peruvian Andes and was very rural. "I worked on a sustainable agricultural tourism project to help citizens there use their skills to survive and thrive."

Afterwards in 2005, Michaela started planning a move to Sweden. "My older brother Tor gave me some sage advice, which I'm glad I listened to. He told me that if I wanted to live in Sweden, I should do it before I meet my 'person' because moving there is difficult. Housing is scarce and expensive."

In fact, when Michaela arrived in Sweden, she ended up staying on her "grandmother's couch for months!" and shared how difficult the job market was for her.

"Eventually, I did go to work for a few television and movie production companies. With Swedish as my first language and being fluent in English, I was able to translate 'pitch books' for shows like "Expedition Robinson" which in the States became "Survivor." I also worked on the pitch book for the show that in the U.S. would become "Big Brother" while also doing freelance graphic design for logos and other things."

While in Sweden she also owned a book publishing company and a multimedia design firm called, Not a Spy. It was also at this time that she and her lifelong Saint Mary's friend decided to start a handmade kids' clothing business.

Michaela and Anna Mack created, "Mick & Mack," which they ran for five years together, with Anna Mack in the States and Michaela in Sweden. But, in 2010, after missing her family and friends in the U.S., she decided to come home and take a job in Colorado. For a year, she worked as a freelance graphic and web designer.

"I was there for only two months when I met my future husband, Nick." Michaela also says that if it wasn't for Saint Mary's, she might not have even dated him.

"We met on Match.com, and I was nervous to meet him because he lived in Aspen, and I was in Denver. It's a bit of a distance and rural. So, after Facebook stalking him," she says and laughs, "I noticed he was friends with one of my Saint Mary's friends, Becca Jane Ayers Cody '01 who was also living in Aspen. I reached out to her, and she's the one who told me Nick was a great guy and I should agree to a date."

In 2011, Michaela moved to Aspen and became the Director of Visual Communication for Challenge America. After a year with that nonprofit, she transitioned to its sister organization. "That's when I went to work for Challenge Aspen as their Director of Marketing, Communications, and PR." Having already been working in nonprofit for Challenge America, Michaela's new position now involved promoting Challenge Aspen's REC, Autism and Military services through event marketing, social media and PR, which also included event management and fundraising.

"Living in Aspen opened my eyes to the disparity there is economically for families," Michaela explains. "All my life I've been called the 'child whisperer' and while I was in college, I'd even thought about pursuing an additional degree in Psychology. So, when I was offered the position of Director of Development for the Aspen Youth Center, I jumped at the chance."

After less than a year fundraising for the organization, running programs, making connections with organizations as supporters, her drive, enthusiasm, and passion for the children served made her the ideal candidate as the nonprofit's next Executive Director. "In March of 2016, I took the job, and I haven't looked back," she says.

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Aspen Youth Center's mission is to provide all local and visiting youth in grades 4-12 with free, daily staff-led programs and free play. "Youth can play air hockey, work in the computer lab, join in dodge ball and basketball games, and participate in art, cooking clubs, and STEAM clubs...and so much more," Michaela explains. As Executive Director, Michaela is not only responsible for running the nonprofit operations and continuing fundraising, she also grew her understanding of what the center means to the children who attend.

"When you look at an adult who's a 'bad person' or who does something very bad, a crime, behavior, etcetera, it's usually because as a child they were lacking support or suffered abuse or experienced a trauma."

Michaela says she came to understand that her role was not as a therapist, and instead she could connect kids to service providers to support a child, no matter the situation. "I thought back to my question that I always ask, 'How can I affect change in this situation, for this population?' and as a mandatory reporter in the state of Colorado, asked myself, what else can I do?"

Michaela partnered with a network of psychologists, psychiatrists, counselors, and other mental health providers, government support agencies, teachers and mentors so those children who needed help and support – or intervention – could be referred. "My staff and I are with these children from nine a.m. to six p.m. Monday through Friday during the summer. During the school year, we're with them all week long from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. and on Wednesdays from 1:30pm until 6 p.m. That's a lot of time to spend together, and children open up in ways they might not with their teachers, parents or other adults. Our counselors are also local high school students who've attended at our center, so the kids also talk to them."

Training is very important for Michaela and for her staff, so she's an advocate for their professional development. "Of 450 nonprofits in the area, only a handful of nonprofit leaders were selected to receive IDEO training this year, and I'm thrilled I was chosen – not just for myself, but for our team. I'll be learning more about design thinking and what's best for our people."

Michaela also shares that in the rural Aspen-area, where it's a 45-minute drive to a Target® and an hour and a half to a Chick-Fil-A®, it's important to have access to regional and national training that helps children they work with to succeed. "I require my staff to receive mental health and trauma informed care training and we've also had Ally Training for LGBTQ students."

One of Michaela's other passions is finding ways to provide daycare to those working or at the poverty level. "It was reinforced as I myself sought daycare after the birth of my now three-year-old daughter, Sylvie."

Michaela cites important statistics about the area she lives in. "According to The Self-Sufficiency Standard for Colorado (2018), a family with one parent and one pre-school aged child needs to earn an income of \$90,931 in Pitkin County, \$71,674 in Eagle County, \$69,001 in Garfield County, the three-county area we serve," she explains. "With two parents, one pre-school aged child, and one school aged child, those numbers rise to \$94,931, \$76,362, and \$76,807 respectively. To compare, a single person with no children needs to earn \$70,200 in Pitkin County and between \$51,013 to \$58,139 in Eagle and Garfield counties in order to be self-sufficient (no federal, state, private aid). 61% of our youth come from families who earn \$85,000 or less. Of that 61%: 18% make \$65,000-\$85,000; 16% earn \$45,000-\$65,000; 15% make \$25,000-\$45,000; and 12% earn \$25,000 and under. And, here in Aspen, our city has to provide doctors' housing, because they need affordable housing themselves. Can you believe it?"

That's one reason why Michaela partnered with a local family to start a grant-making foundation called the Zurbuch Foundation where she's now a board member. "The family owned my daughter's daycare center and wanted to set up a foundation to provide grants to families who couldn't afford daycare and did not qualify for government assistance or other aid. In a year-and-a-half, we've given away \$65,000 in grants," she says.

Michaela also finds ways to help local teens. "Not only do we hire former students who are now old enough to become counselors themselves during the summer, I also provide internships to get kids the experience they need to find a permanent a job."

She's also recently offered to provide a 2-4 week internship to Saint Mary's girls interested in nonprofit work. "I'm happy to also open my home to them, they just need to like big dogs and kids!"

Michaela stays engaged with her alma mater by being a loyal donor to Saint Mary's Annual Fund and keeping up with classmates and other Saint Mary's friends. "Anna Mack Hardison Severn, Wendy Aves, my sister and I will be gathering in North Carolina in August to attend the Backstreet Boys concert in Raleigh, which we first did together 20 years ago when they were there!"

Next April 2020, Michaela and her classmates' twenty year Saint Mary's High School Reunion is also coming up, and as she reflects back, she shares this advice for today's students: "Don't just go to

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college to get a degree and think that's your job for life. Spend time volunteering, studying abroad and get a degree in an area you enjoy. Later, get a Master's in the area of your passion, after you figure that out. And, don't be scared – go! Try new things, get another degree, follow your interests and then make a difference somehow with that knowledge.”

Saint Mary's alumnae like Michaela graduate with the skills, knowledge, and integrity they need for success. Whether furthering their education, pursuing professional careers, raising their families, or leading as volunteers, our alumnae are agents for positive change in their communities. Michaela's story demonstrates the power Saint Mary's women have in affecting change. She also embodies the spirit of Saint Mary's women who are educated to make a difference and who are intelligent, resilient, resourceful, passionate, and nurturing, and we are grateful for the impact she's having on the world.

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