



**Marina and Michele Stewart** on their way to San Mateo.

# Schools drive commuters over the hill

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— JULIE WALKER,  
HALF MOON BAY PARENT

## Coastside families weather distance, time for children's education

BY GREG THOMAS, REVIEW STAFF WRITER  
PHOTOS BY KATE KRUTZNER

**M**ichele Stewart has happily reconfigured her life to send her daughters to high schools over the hill. Her transition from stay-at-home mom to full-time working mother is a casualty of parenthood the Half Moon Bay woman accepts as par for the course.

"The way my husband and I look at it is, you make short-term sacrifices for long-term goals," Stewart said nonchalantly.

Her firstborn, Allison, began attending Stanbridge Academy in San Mateo in 2004, and with Marina three years behind her, Stewart knew the only way to make ends meet would be to tighten the only belt the family could — her own.

Shortly after Allison's enrollment, Stewart took on a full-time job — for the first time in six years — at a tax and financial office in Half Moon Bay. She also traded in her SUV for a fuel-efficient hybrid and bid farewell to fancy family vacations in Mexico and abroad. When Marina started attending Mercy High School in Burlingame last year, during Allison's senior year in San Mateo, Stewart hit the road at about 7 a.m. on her commute circuit, arriving at her office



**Julie Walker** and daughter Rachel begin their daily journey to San Francisco.

around 8:30 a.m.

"It just comes with the territory when you choose to live in a small-town community; you're going to spend some time on the road," she said.

Such are the concessions some Coastside families make to furnish their children with an alternative secondary school education. Parents say that decision shouldn't reflect poorly on Half Moon Bay High School; rather, it's a reflection of their children's particular needs. Without a variety of schools to choose from locally, they do what they have to do to put their children in the classrooms they feel are most conducive to their children's development.

"I think my kids would have done really well at Half Moon Bay High School. They have good friends; they're internally motivated. But I felt they'd get something extra at St. Ignatius that I thought would change their perspective on the world, and I wanted them to have that opportunity," said Montara resident Wendy Brown, whose two sons are enrolled at the San Fran-

cisco private school and whose daughter graduated from there in June. "We're not even Catholic!"

Brown's husband teaches ethics at University of San Francisco. In his experience teaching undergrads, he's noticed that the most "academically outstanding" students in his classes come from S.I., she said. That observation, coupled with the school's mantle promoting "a thirst ... for the greater good," sealed the deal for the whole family.

From the time their first child entered S.I., school became a frontier of new challenges and obstacles for the parents and children alike.

Mostly, it's the drive — traffic and timing. Brown plans her life around her children's schedules; many parents do. But unlike Coastside families whose children attend local high schools, Brown commutes an hour-and-a-half, round trip, sometimes twice a day or more during the school year. It may sound like a hefty burden, but Brown says the schlepping is a small price to pay for peace of mind, knowing her children are being engaged

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by top educators. Plus, the trip affords her precious "face time" with her kids — moments that are tough to garner with socially and academically active teenagers, she says.

"Often some of the best conversations come from that (drive), when the day is fresh in their minds," she said. "You get that initial, raw, unfiltered response. 'Cause they're kind of stuck there with you. And it reminds me, that's why I'm doing this, that's why I'm driving up there."

As a stay-at-home mom, Brown has the luxury of flexibility. Some families don't.

During tax season, Michele Stewart is hard-pressed to carve out an hour of her day to scoop up her daughter at Mercy and shuttle her home to Half Moon Bay. Those are the days Marina has to be responsible for finding her own way home — on the bus system or from a friend.

The rest of the school year, Marina says her commute is reasonably straightforward. Generally, on the way to school in the morning she'll catch up on sleep or studying; driving home, she reads, chats with her mom and delights in the scenery along Interstate 280 and Highway 92.

But not all days are the same. Depending on the day and the season, getting to and from school can be either a grueling or soothing process, she added. A sudden change in plans — on her part or her mother's — has a way of undermining their fragile commute system.

"Once in a while it happens, when there's traffic and my mom can't get over the hill for over an hour," the 14-year-old incoming sophomore said.

"Sometimes I wish I didn't have to make that drive all the time," she added, "but sometimes it has its advantages."

The same can be said for her choice to pursue an education away from home. Marina loves her school's picturesque campus, its emphasis on achievement and the camaraderie of a small, all-girl student body. Gaining preparation for college was the linchpin in her decision, she says. But with the daily drive, scholastic demands, after-school sports, clubs and homework, there isn't much time to keep up with her friends — Coastsiders or new school chums.

"It frustrates me that I have to do everything over there," she said. "It takes me half an hour to get over the hill, so I can't

make plans with (Coastsider) friends after school. ... It's made us grow apart. I don't really talk to them anymore."

Coastsiders who choose schools outside the region share that predicament. But the impact is different in each situation.

Rachel Walker started school in a new setting last year — at St. Ignatius — and welcomed the transition with open arms.

"It was nice to go somewhere where no one knows you and you don't have an image already. You're not put into a group. I didn't change myself. It was more that I was able to be myself more comfortably," she said, explaining her desire for a more challenging curriculum than she'd received at Coastsider schools.

Her acceptance to S.I., with its top-notch academic program, overshadows her separation from childhood friends and the commute as well.

The Walker family is one pillar of a carpool system supported by a handful of families whose children attend the same school. Each family is responsible for driving two or three times a week. They keep in constant correspondence through a carpool e-mail group.

"It makes it relatively easy," said Julie Walker, Rachel's mom.

The only pitfall is keeping track of all the kids a driver is supposed to pick up on a given run to San Francisco, she added.

"There were a couple times where we thought we knew who we were picking up and forgot a kid and had to go back and get them," Julie Walker said. "All in all, it's a good system."

The Stewart family tried carpooling two years ago with Allison, to and from San Mateo, but after-school activities and conflicting schedules created a "hit-and-miss" situation, Michele Stewart said. Still, the family is looking into finding a carpool for Marina to and from Mercy.

"There are a lot of Half Moon Bay, Moss Beach, and Montara kids that go to Mercy. ... The sources are there. It's just getting it all to work," Michele Stewart said.

At the end of the day, parents say the longer drive time is the only significant sacrifice they make. And even then, they say, it's been beneficial.

"When I'm by myself (in the car) I listen to the news station. On the way back, I talk to Rachel," Julie Walker said. "It's been good bonding time for us. ... It's definitely not been time wasted." **hmb**