

# Pull of the Ocean

PROXIMITY TO THE BEACH AND A SENSE OF  
COMMUNITY DRAWS MELISSA DISHAROON  
AND FAMILY BACK TO THE SOUTH BAY.

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**M**elissa Disharoon came to appreciate the ocean only after it was no longer in her backyard. Growing up in Manhattan Beach and attending Mira Costa High School, she engaged in two passions: drama and dance. "I was deep into theatre," she says, playing the leads and choreographing the school's productions, as well as heading up the thespian group.

When she wasn't at school, Melissa was at the dance studio practicing ballet, jazz and tap and preparing to pursue a career on Broadway. That left little time to take advantage of the nearby coastline.

When she was 22 and playing the lead in her first professional theatrical role, Melissa experienced a bewildering set of symptoms during a single day, including numbness in her tongue, vertigo and stumbling. She was diagnosed with relapsing remitting multiple sclerosis—a disease that interferes with nerve impulses traveling to and from the brain and spinal cord.

MS affects each person differently. As Melissa explains, having an MS relapse (episode) is like the severe stretching of a rubber band. The

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stretching eventually stops, but the rubber band does not return to its previous shape. So while her coordination returned, she knew her dancing career was over.

That same year, Melissa met Scott Disharoon—a theatre and independent film producer. The couple married and welcomed son Teagan 13 years ago and twins Finn and Harper just over a year later. The family lived in Hancock Park and later Atwater Village, enjoying the cosmopolitan atmosphere and diversity of those communities.

But the ocean was already exerting its pull. During a summer vacation 10 years ago, Melissa and a friend organized a weekly beach excursion with their children. They started inviting other families, and—in the days before blogs—Melissa wrote weekly missives about the week’s adventure. Now the group has grown to 170 families, with between 10 and 30 families going to the beach any given summer Friday.

Four years ago Melissa had her first serious relapse of MS since having children, and it was “a doozy.” It left her with numbness and tingling in half her body, difficulty walking more than a few yards and a tendency to get easily fatigued. Shuttling her three children to school and sports became exhausting, and Melissa longed for a place where she could feel safe letting them get around on their own.

Her dad still lived in Manhattan Beach, and this summer Melissa and

the kids stayed with him for a week. “I reconnected with old friends, and we spent days at the beach,” she says. “We loved our Atwater community, but something was pulling me here.”

Within three weeks, she found a house in the Golden Hills area of Redondo Beach. The family moved in on August 15. Now all three kids attend the same middle school, and Melissa is delighted that they’ll soon attend her alma mater.

Teagan plays baseball, while Finn and Harper pursue wrestling. Scott plays basketball and baseball when work allows, and Grandpa—who lives a mile down the road—attends the kids’ sports activities.

“It’s a whole new life for us here,” says Melissa. “My kids can ride their bikes or walk to school. They can go to the beach, visit my dad or just explore. They have an independence we never would have been allowed in the city.”

Returning to the South Bay also allowed Melissa to reconnect with her former dance teacher, now 80 years old. She takes semi-private lessons twice a week.

And she has the ocean, which she visits almost daily. “It’s become more and more a part of my being and health and sanity,” she says. “There’s something about the beach and the ocean. It’s so expansive and overwhelming in this terrific way ... it’s the great equalizer.” ■



## MELISSA'S YEAR IN HEALTH

### DAILY ITINERARY

With MS, each day is different. One major activity, such as a trip to Costco, can often sap Melissa's energy for the rest of the day. That said, each day she tries to include: connecting with a friend, whether by phone, for coffee or for lunch; visiting the beach/spending time outdoors; stretching; overseeing the kids' homework.

### DIET

Avoid carbs and sugar; follow a mostly paleo, anti-inflammatory diet without depriving herself

### WORKOUT ROUTINE

Dance class twice a week; morning stretching and strengthening exercises; trying to find a chair exercise class

### FREE TIME

Visiting the beach; seeing movies with her dad; attending theatre and dance performances

### GUILTY PLEASURES

"Maybe living with a chronic disease—not knowing when the shoe will drop and everyday activities will be compromised—allows me to enjoy the moment and good things in life.

Whether it's relishing in a quiet cup of tea, a midweek nap, a massage, an indulgence shared with a friend ... as long as it's legal and not harming anyone, we should enjoy it guilt-free."

### FITNESS/HEALTH INSPIRATION

Her 80-year-old dance teacher, who has the strength and energy of a 20-year-old