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Philanthropists
John Sie and
his daughter,
Michelle Sie Whitten

OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 2010
FOUR DOLLARS

by Corinne Joy Brown

Photography by Wonderworks

John J. Sie and Michelle Sie Whitten

The apple doesn't fall far
from the tree



Leadership is defined by the ability to care, reason, act, and lead. Rarely is it transferred from one generation to another, except when a parent or role model provides close guidance and mentorship. Even then, there are no guarantees. But in the case of John J. Sie and Michelle Sie Whitten, two exceptional individuals quietly changing the world who just happen to be father and daughter, one has to wonder if it isn't also in their genes.

"Who I am has a lot to do with my mother, as well," adds Michelle with a smile, giving full credit to Anna Sie, the other half of an extraordinary marriage and partnership. Both John and Anna Sie are familiar names in Denver to many: John, a visionary in the business world and the retired CEO of Starz Entertainment, came from a long and diverse successful corporate history before heading one of the most successful cable television giants since HBO. Born in China, he came to America in 1950 and has pursued professional, cultural and philanthropic pursuits with equal measure, as well as raising a family of five successful children.

The engaging Anna was born in Italy and the couple's diverse backgrounds have provided for a life rich with cultural diversity and travel. Together, they're involved in numerous philanthropies and have recently been honored by several of Denver's non-profit organizations, including the Mizel Museum.

Michelle was encouraged by her father to pursue business rather than anthropology after completing an MA in East Asian Studies at Harvard. So she entered the business world selling cable TV in China. Her experience there served her well, honing



her analytic and strategic planning skills. Following her return to Denver, marriage, and the start of a family, she accepted the role as Executive Director of the Anna and John J. Sie Foundation. The Sie Foundation was created in 2003 to help non-profits including the areas of arts, education, international diplomacy, and abused or neglected children. The Sie Foundation reviews applications year round. In 2009 alone, 70 grants were awarded, both by invitation and circumstance. If that weren't already enough, Michelle also spearheads the public charity, Global Down Syndrome Foundation, established in 2009.

Impassioned, organized, and an articulate communicator, Michelle's greatest qualification for her current job is the fact that she's personally vested in successful outcomes. She and her husband, Tom Whitten, an international consultant in Asian art, are the parents of two beautiful children, the eldest of whom, Sophia, age 7, has Down syndrome. This condition affects physical and cognitive development and is the result of being born with three copies of the 21st chromosome instead of two. It occurs in one out of 733 Americans irrespective of race, nationality, or socio-economic status. But by receiving proper care from birth, along with education and medical support, individuals with Down syndrome are leading fulfilling lives.

"I see myself as a strategist and an advocate for people with Down syndrome," said Michelle. "There are millions of people with Down syndrome yet we are the least funded. Best practices for our children are simply unknown or not disseminated. For example, there is no registry for people with Down syndrome and no evidenced-based research on how our children learn. I want to get the word out to our government, doctors, therapists and educators; the status quo must change."

When the Whittens became aware of their daughter's condition prenatally, they searched for information. Michelle wasn't satisfied. She began to educate herself and others, as well as provide for more research and programs, providing families who have children with Down syndrome better access to information and care. "My father was shocked at the lack of funding and fixated on the science—on improving outcomes. My mother, a pragmatist, insisted on programs and services—right now!"

At 43, Michelle may be one of the youngest directors of an international organization that appears to be expanding exponentially even while she sleeps. Since its founding, major milestones include the gifting of \$22 million by the Sie Foundation

that established the Linda Crnic Institute for Down Syndrome at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical campus and the affiliated Anna and John J. Sie Center for Down Syndrome at Children's Hospital in Aurora. Other milestones include the funding of life skills classes for adults with Down syndrome at DU, the establishment of the Be Beautiful Be Yourself Jet Set Fashion Show fundraiser that is now one of the top grossing events in Colorado, and a series of nationally acclaimed educational symposia for professionals and parents, to name a few.

At the onset, Michelle immersed herself in understanding Down syndrome--visiting care centers in Mexico City, Cincinnati, Boston, Maryland, Pittsburgh and Palo Alto. Now, fast-forward to 2010 and the Denver based organization has become the primary center that others turn to. Over 2000 people have attended its highly respected Symposia Series and Michelle has recently been flown to Saudi Arabia to consult in best care practices there. Most significant is that in August of 2010 the Linda Crnic Institute for Down Syndrome hired its first executive director, Edward McCabe, MD, PhD, a renowned pediatrician and geneticist, and its first Clinical Care Director, Fran Hickey, MD. The foundation's forthcoming fundraiser, the Jet Set Fashion Show featuring Quincy Jones, Timothy Shriver and hosted by Kim Christiansen, titled "Be Beautiful Be Yourself," proudly engages individuals with developmental disabilities as models. Michelle says, "We're simply trying to attract the best minds with the best hearts."

As a proud father whose family name is now intimately tied to health care for people with Down syndrome, John J. Sie reflects, "The advances in bio-science clearly indicates that medical and cognitive breakthrough for children with Down syndrome is within our grasp and soon. Yet children with Down syndrome have been written off as not worthy of research, or worse as hopeless. In many countries hospitals still refuse life saving procedures for these children. Anna and I know each time we spend time with our Sophia, and all the children with

Down syndrome we've been lucky enough to meet, that these children (like all children) are worthy and must be given an opportunity to reach their potential. I hope that

For more information

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what we have brought up in Michelle—a strong work ethic, an optimism that everything is possible, determination, commitment, and compassion and love for all but especially the marginalized—is something that will help her to stay the course and to really improve the lives of people with Down syndrome all over the world. She has done so much already but the hardest work is yet to come. We are so blessed to have this community here in Colorado to help her shoulder that responsibility.” **CE**

