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**THESE FAMOUS FOLKS ALL HAVE SOMETHING IN COMMON—
A SIX-PERSON [OR LESS] CONNECTION WITH ALBUQUERQUE.**



Ardi Durco, MD
Pediatric

WIN
SUPPLY



One Rockin' Doc

By day, she's Dr. Andrea Duncan, a pediatric specialist working with the tiniest of babies. By night, she's Andi Duncan, who belts out the blues.

As the heart and soul of Albuquerque's funkier alt-blues band, you might expect Andi Duncan to dream of quitting her day job.

No way. Not when New Mexico's tiniest, most vulnerable babies depend on Duncan for their lives.

Though she spends her evenings in bars belting out blues and rock in her rich, classically trained soprano, by day Dr. Andrea Duncan is a highly skilled pediatric specialist immersed in the life-and-death struggles of the neonatal intensive care unit at the University of New Mexico Health Sciences Center. Her patients, many born months premature, often weigh less than a pound, their skin translucent, their thread-like veins hooked to miniature IVs as they struggle to survive. She loves them as if they were her own, and works 80-hour weeks doing all in her power to help them pull through—and, when she can't, to help them pass peacefully.

"I have seen joy and devastation. I know what those things are," says Duncan, 37, a Texas native who joined UNM's neonatology program as an assistant professor four years ago. While there's no greater happiness than watching a preemie blossom into a healthy kid, she feels a special connection to the infants who don't make it. "It's a gift to help that child be able to die with dignity," she says, "and to help their family let their child go to heaven."

Exceedingly down to earth despite stellar

academic credentials it would be hard to peg Duncan as a physician if you spotted her in the hospital; she never wears a white coat and favors outfits like black leather miniskirts, suede boots, and funky sweaters and jewelry. She's quick to smile and laugh, and has a wicked sense of humor. But she's dead serious about her work. As young medical residents follow her through rounds, Duncan explains to treat each infant with compassion (she even wears a gold necklace with that word on it). "I

do not want them called 'Baby Girl Smith' or 'Baby Boy Jones,'" Duncan explains. "I want to know their names because they are tiny human beings—and they belong to someone."

Three years ago, a chance conversation with a colleague at the hospital led to Duncan's unplanned musical sideline. The woman mentioned that her husband, Clay Lowder, played drums for the Little Sister Band, an alt-blues group in need of a lead singer. Though she'd never sung with a band, Duncan had trained in opera as an undergrad at the University of Texas at Austin, and listened to everything from Jay Z to Tori Amos. A week later, she was onstage at her first live gig.

Today, the Little Sister Band, which also includes guitarists Dave Wilson and Mike Wood, with Norm Toy on bass, has amassed a loyal following in Albuquerque, Santa Fe, and southern Colorado. Fans are drawn to its fun, funk-and-soul tinged songs, most of them originals penned by Lowder and, increasingly, Duncan. Last year, the Little Sister Band released its eponymous first CD with 10 original tunes, and soon will release its as-yet-unnamed second.

Performing before the band's often-rowdy audiences, who crowd the dance floor and shout out lyrics, offers Duncan a release from the unrelenting pressures of the NICU. "There was one time where I'd had a particularly bad day—I had lost a kid," Duncan says, her face clouding. "I had to go straight from the hospital to the gig, and I was crying all the way there." Lowder urged her to carry the emotion to the stage that night, and something clicked—her performance was among her best. "It's cathartic, the whole music-making process," she says. "Singing is where I feel fully in my skin and grounded."

"I didn't expect any of this," Duncan says, with a huge smile. "It's such a joy to be going to rehearsals with a band, to be writing music. I have no idea where it's going, and that's not too important to me. I love where it is right now."

Her bandmates and fans can sense that. "The thing for me, and for the audience, is her energy and her enthusiasm, and the fact she gets up there and just goes for it," Lowder says. "She doesn't hold back. She puts a lot of emotion and a lot of honesty into what she's doing."

For anyone less energetic—and organized—melding a musical career with medicine would be impossible. "I saw the other day that she was doing another show, and I texted her and said, 'Are you really a doctor?'" says Alecia C. Nero, a hematologist in Dallas who's been Duncan's best friend since they attended the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas. "But music has been such a passion of hers for so long that if she didn't do it, she'd be out of sorts. I think it helps her stay balanced."

Medical director of UNM's developmental care program, Duncan—who holds an M.D. and a master's degree in clinical research—is leading cutting-edge studies to help premature babies avoid cognitive and other problems later in life. It's a field that's in its own infancy, and in which, under her direction, UNM is helping to blaze trails. "Fifty percent of our tiniest babies—even the ones who have normal ultrasounds when they go home—end up having executive function or processing deficits that we didn't pick up on," she says. "I really want to make a difference, to put my stamp on improving the long-term outcomes for these kids."

Duncan hopes to serve as a role model to encourage people to follow their dreams: in medicine, the arts, or—like her—both. "Whether it's a mom or a dad, or a sibling of one of my patients, or a medical student, or someone I meet on the elevator," Duncan says, "if I can have one person think, 'Oh, I can do that,' then that's all I really need."

Duncan lives in Albuquerque with her husband, Bart, a developer at Microsoft. She's convinced the opportunity to blend her two passions couldn't happen anywhere but the Duke City, where she believes that making deep connections occurs almost mystically. "I didn't expect any of this," Duncan says, with a huge smile. "It's such a joy to be going to rehearsals with a band, to be writing music. I have no idea where it's going, and that's not too important to me. I love where it is right now."

—ELAINE MCARDLE

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