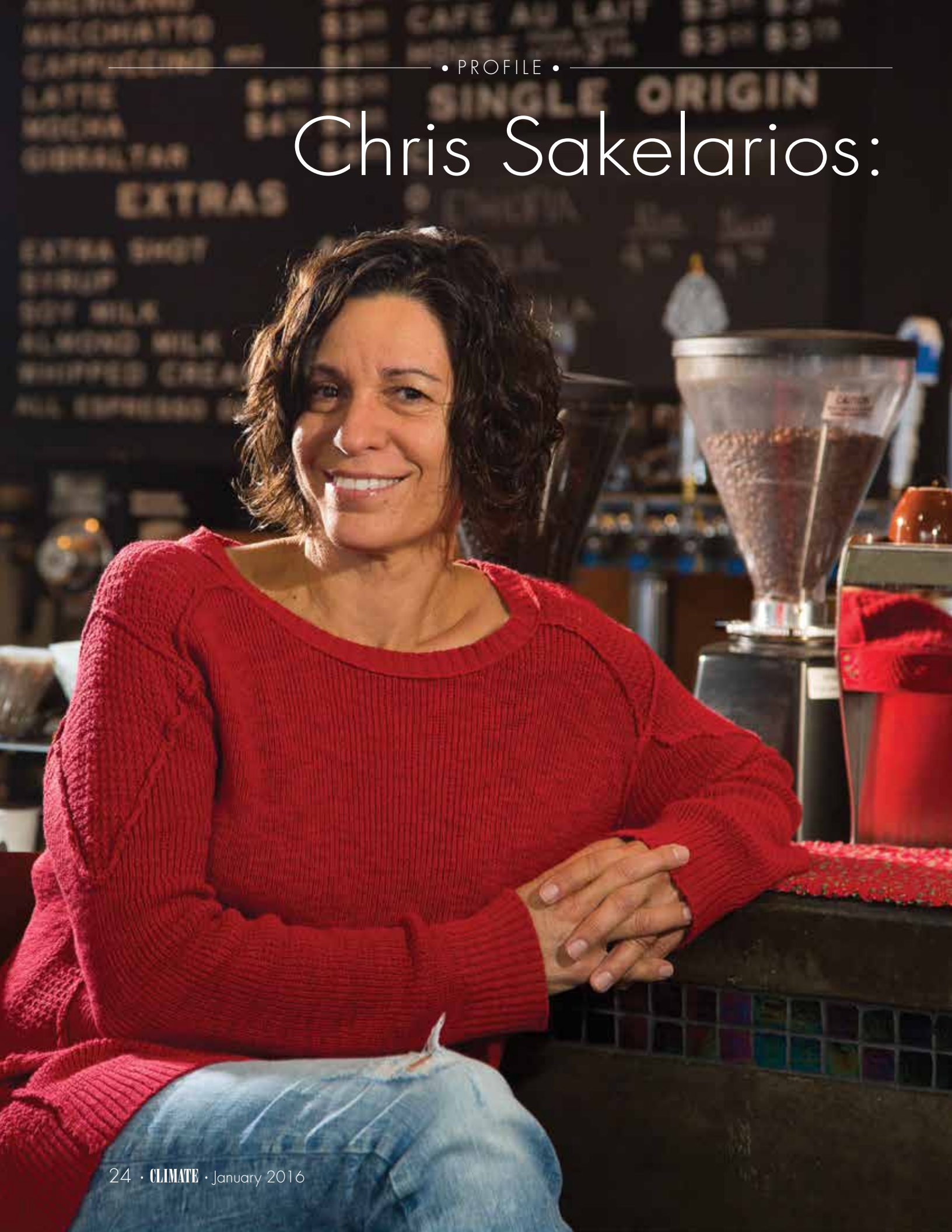


# Chris Sakelarios:



Athlete, business woman, servant, guardian angel.  
Quietly watching over the community in her own

# BACKYARD



By Emily Mangini  
Photos by Jim Kirkland

**"I am told I'm shy,"** Chris Sakelarios says, a chuckle modulating her soft voice. Sakelarios and I have been acquaintances for a few years and my first thought is to agree. But as Sakelarios shares her story, my perspective begins to shift. A theme weaves its way through her personal journey, from childhood runner, to decorated elite athlete, to Redwood City small business owner and to active community member. And it's not shyness.



## Sakelarios' is a truly gentle spirit, a fact obvious in all the endeavors in which she has immersed herself, as personal trainer, coffeehouse maven and community activist.

It's the thrill of the journey, of helping others along the way. And so, I realize, Sakelarios' soft voice and unassuming demeanor do not identify her as timid. She's gentle, ready to give a hug or helping hand. Sakelarios doesn't need to shout. Her mere presence communicates depths. Long before she was the owner of Backyard Coffee Co. at 965 Brewster and its attached personal training gym, she personified boundless energy.

"My Uncle, Tibby (Ortega), saw that I loved running, and told my dad about Future Olympians, a track and field program through the Redwood City Recreation Department," she said.

"That was two weeks before my sixth birthday. I was the youngest on the team." That also was the start of her career as an elite runner and race walker, though at the time no one foresaw it.

The week long running camp closed with a track and field meet. Sakelarios finished dead last in every event.

"But my dad saw that I loved it, and so he found Redwood City Striders, a youth cross country team."

Again the youngest on the team, Sakelarios would be a mere nine years old when she ran her first marathon.

"We were logging 100 miles a week, and part of our training was to do Bay to Breakers," Sakelarios said. But on the day of Bay to Breakers Sakelarios ran into a problem. She was a girl.

"My dad filled out my registration form using my full name, Christine," she recalled. "The registration person took one look at it, and said that, as a girl, the race would be too much for me."

Her father insisted that his daughter could handle the race, but the person wouldn't budge. So he simply requested a new entry form. This time he put her name down as 'Chris.'

"I tore up that race," Sakelarios smiled. As for the marathon, she finished that too, but not without incident.

A smaller race of only 200 competitors, the group was largely spread out along the course and a young Sakelarios found herself running through Redwood City's Huddart Park by herself.

"All I could hear were my footsteps and my breath. I was totally alone in the woods. I got so scared."

At the sight of her dad at the park exit, she leaped into his arms, upset and ready to quit.

"We ran the next five miles holding hands." She paused to let the sweet recollection to take shape.

"But then he was slowing me down, so I had to let go and finish on my own."

Sakelarios' discovery of race walking, the event in which she would compete all over the globe, including representing Team USA at four World Championships, was something of an accident.

"Our coach had us participate in the race walking competition as a way to warm up for the rest of the meet, and I won," she said.

Yielding to the obvious, the coach made race walking a regular event for her.

"I ended up being undefeated in the United States from 13 to 19 years old. And at 14 years old I tried out for the world championship team. And guess what? I made it!"

That was 1973. More than 40 years later, she still seems surprised and humbled.

When I admit that I have never seen race walking in action and cannot fathom how she ever 'walked' her personal record of a six-minute, 56-second mile, she jumps off the couch.

"Let me show you!" She heads to the other end of the cafe and turns on her heel. In a flash, Sakelarios explodes back across the room, arms pumping, feet moving with such speed and fluidity it's as if she is riding a hoverboard. She floats back down to the couch as if nothing ever happened.

"See? It's that easy," she said. While I'm not sure I would call it easy, she certainly makes it look like it.

In 1984 race walking became an Olympic event, and Sakelarios' 16 years of competing in the Olympic trials began.

"You know, I just kept qualifying," Sakelarios said nonchalantly, "Race walking wasn't added until I was past my prime, so I always knew I wouldn't make the top three. It was never been about winning though, not for me at least. It's about the thrill and fun of the training and racing."

Sakelarios continued to compete after the Olympic trials and raced for Cal Poly Pomona, where she received a full athletic scholarship. She had no intention of slowing down, but in 2001, a breast cancer diagnosis did just that.

In true Sakelarios form, she mentions this in a soft murmur.

"Oh, I had breast cancer in 2001. Is that important?" she asked. Sakelarios' doesn't want the experience to define her. "It slowed down my training, but I got back on the track and to work as soon as possible."

Through her personal training business and its custom-built mobile gym, Sakelarios gained a reputation for working miracles helping people recover from injuries or chronic pain.

The phone call she received one afternoon therefore came as no surprise.

The woman on the other end of the phone was named Shirley. Through tears, Shirley admitted that, at a weight of 600 pounds, she had not been out of bed for over a year.

She said she couldn't find anyone to help her lose weight, Sakelarios recalled, because, "everyone was afraid of lawsuits, because she was so big."

Sakelarios on the other hand, didn't hesitate. She immediately accepted the challenge and, on the first day she met Shirley, jerry-rigged a system of straps and pulleys to create simple resistance exercises for her.

"My ultimate goal was to get Shirley out of bed, and I knew we had our work cut out for us," she said.

She came up with a training plan, provided Shirley would commit to it seven days a week. Shirley agreed, but couldn't afford a personal trainer seven days a week.

"I didn't care about the money, I wanted to help her. So we came up with a monthly rate that would work for her."

Sakelarios helped Shirley lose 200 pounds the first year, and a close friendship developed.

Still, Shirley harbored guilt that she was paying Sakelarios a mere fraction of her value.

"I kept telling her that the money didn't matter, that the reward would be getting her out of bed," Sakelarios said.

That day finally came. But it was a beginning, not a conclusion. Sakelarios had another idea.

"I told Shirley that I was going to start a business in downtown Redwood City, somewhere close so she could scooter down and work for me. That would be her



*Sakelarios at the beginning of her athletic career.*

'payment' for training and she could stop feeling badly."

Though she neither drank nor enjoyed coffee, Sakelarios had a friend who was building a state-of-the-art espresso machine, so she decided to open a coffee shop and gym.

"I wanted to create a space for people that was inviting, somewhere people could come, and feel at home," she said of her gym-coffee house concept to marry the espresso machine, her fitness business and friend Shirley.

The result was Backyard Coffee Co. The project was well on its way to fruition when a phone call blunted all momentum. It was the hospital. Shirley had passed away.

"It was such a sudden loss," Sakelarios said. She feels her friend's absence as a fresh wound nine years later.

While helping sort through Shirley's belongings, Sakelarios found a series of journals. "I read an entry in which Shirley said she had finally found a friend who loved her unconditionally. Then I realized that she was writing about me."

A solemn moment ensued before Sakelarios continued.

"I decided to keep going with the coffee shop, to open it in Shirley's honor."

Sakelarios found a spot on Brewster Avenue that had been vacant for years.

"I had no idea what I was getting myself into. Every day was an adventure. It still is," she said.

With the help of friends, including the one who built the espresso machine, Sakelarios survived the build out of coffee shop and gym.

It is a place where local artists' work hangs on the walls, musicians perform, and even amateur comedians come and test their chops.

Not content to simply run the cafe and the personal training business, Sakelarios has found time to start a grassroots community movement, People Helping People, composed of 600 community members.

When Sakelarios learns of areas in Redwood City that need a little TLC, she reaches out to the group via email for help. It may be a trash-strewn section of El Camino Real or a neighbor's yard that needs clearing, whatever it is Sakelarios sends out the time and location. Anyone with People Helping People who can shows up to pitch in. "It's just a way for us to give back to the community," Sakelarios said, quick to defer recognition to the group.

Sakelarios' is a truly gentle spirit, a fact obvious in all the endeavors in which she has immersed herself, as personal trainer, coffeehouse maven and community activist.

The soundtrack for the evening of our conversation was the laughter of a motley crew of twenty-somethings.

Each was a current or former employee of the café. They lingered at the coffee bar, not quite ready to call it a night, but the evening eventually drew to a close. As the group filed out the door, they turned in unison to give a smile and a wave to Sakelarios. They'll be back tomorrow, for work, for friends.

"Bye guys," she softly called back. A smile spreads across her face, her work today done. **C**