



AUGUST 2016

PA Professional

THE LEADING NEWS RESOURCE FOR PAs

FROM THE SURGICAL SUITE TO AN INTERNATIONAL STAGE

PA Houry Gebeshian
Headed for Rio Olympics



FROM THE SURGICAL SUITE TO AN INTERNATIONAL STAGE

PA Houry Gebeshian Headed for Rio Olympics

BY HILLEL KUTTNER

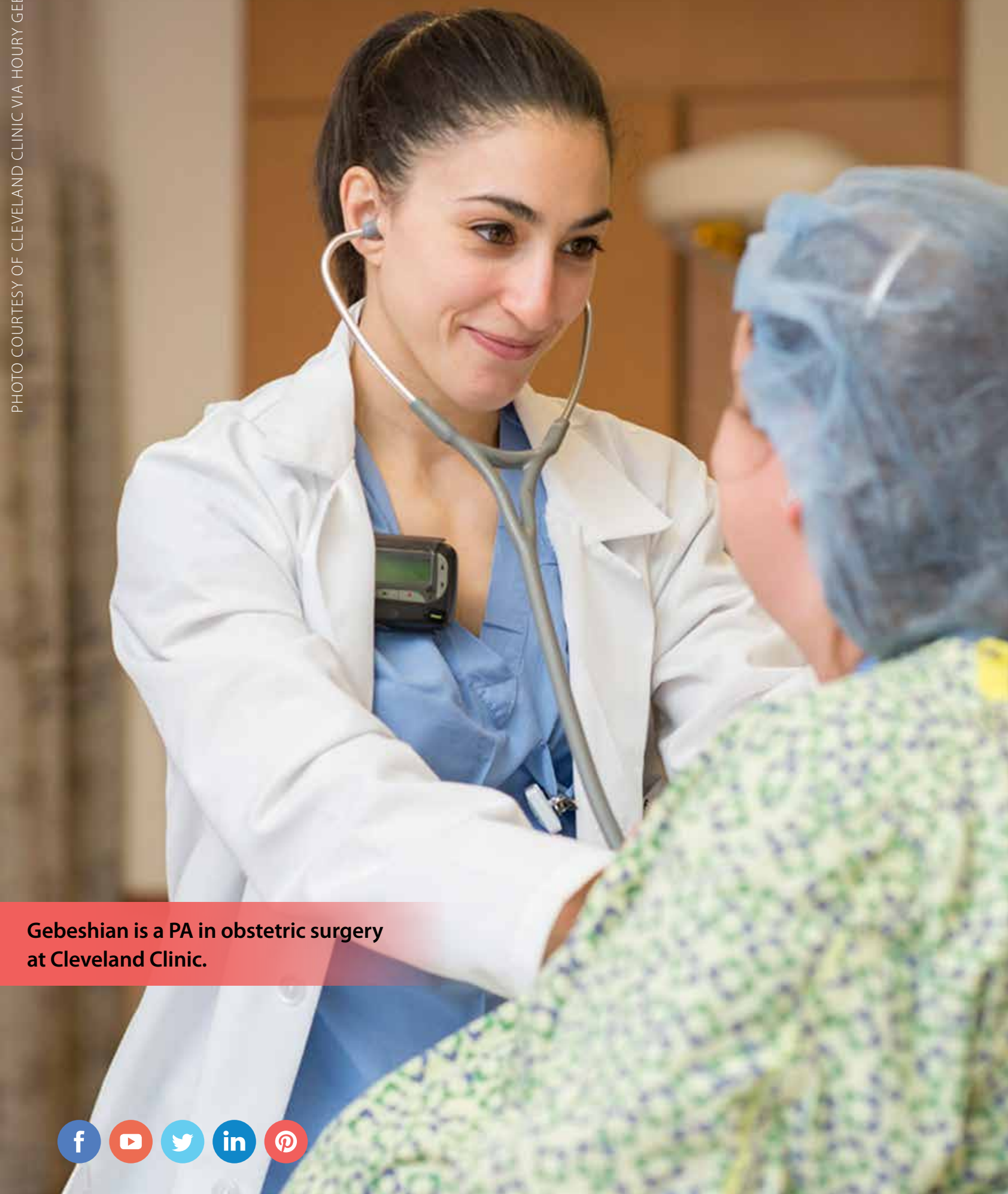
Every day she works at the Cleveland Clinic, PA Houry Gebeshian welcomes new lives to the world. "It's an amazing experience to see these squirming babies take their first breath," she says.

Gebeshian is about to accomplish a first herself.

In August, she will be competing in the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro. The first female gymnast to represent her ancestral land of Armenia in the Games, Gebeshian will do four events: floor

Gebeshian is a PA by night and a gymnast by day.





Gebeshian is a PA in obstetric surgery at Cleveland Clinic.

exercise, vault, uneven bars and balance beam. The Wall Street Journal named her one of the gymnasts to watch in Rio.

Gebeshian, who specializes in obstetric surgery, could even attain immortality in Brazil.

That would occur if she executes a new maneuver she's devised for the uneven bars and has successfully completed in practices. (We're keeping it under wraps because she's going to unveil it at the Games.)

In keeping with the sport's tradition, the move would then be named for her: The Gebeshian.

Connecting the Dots

Gebeshian's pathways in gymnastics and medicine have touched at several points in her career. Always interested in medicine, she started her career as a certified athletic trainer. She later realized that she wanted to further her education, switching paths to become a PA. That led her to a clinical rotation in Cleveland when she was a second-year PA student at Wake Forest University.

Gebeshian arranged a rotation in podiatric surgery at St. Vincent Charity Medical Center's Spine and Orthopedic Institute. Her preceptor was a podiatrist and former gymnast, Michael Canales, who she had met years before in Tokyo at the 2011 World Championships when she was making her first attempt to earn a berth at the 2012 Olympic Games in London. She ended up retiring from gymnastics following a calcaneal stress fracture that ended her chances to qualify for the 2012 Games.

Canales and his wife Dominique Moceanu—Gebeshian's childhood idol, former U.S. gymnast, and 1996 Olympic gold medalist—were covering the event for a gymnastics magazine. "I always marvel at how the dots of life are supernaturally connected," he now says of the chain of events.

Canales remains impressed with the “rare” skill Gebeshian exhibited during the rotation, when she did histories and physicals for patients and assisted him in surgery.

“By the end of the month, she was performing like a first-year resident, an intern,” Canales says. “Within the first week, she’d picked it up; oftentimes, it takes a full year, year and a half, for someone new to the OR to know how to behave. And, she was very humble with our staff, with the OR nurses.”

Reigniting Her Dream

During her month at the institute in 2013, she met another podiatrist, Duane Ehredt Jr., who was completing his residency training in foot and reconstructive rear foot/ankle surgery under Canales. The two started dating and were later engaged. It was Ehredt who encouraged Gebeshian to give gymnastics another shot. They made a plan, and after graduating from Wake Forest in 2014, Gebeshian returned to Cleveland.

Through the guidance of Canales and Moceanu, Gebeshian started training at Gymnastics World in nearby Broadview Heights, a facility where Canales and Moceanu trained during their gymnastics careers, and where their children now train. With no job lined up, no coach to coach her, and no place to live, Gebeshian nevertheless followed through with her commitment to Ehredt, and was on her way to make her Olympic dream a reality.

Reconnecting with Canales and Moceanu wasn’t the only bit of good fortune to come Gebeshian’s way. When interviewing for a job at Cleveland Clinic, she told PA James Nahrstedt up front that gymnastics was her first priority, but that she’d bust her tail to succeed at work, too.

Rather than finding that off-putting, the message impressed Nahrstedt, PA coordinator for Cleveland Clinic’s surgery department. Gebeshian’s up-front

statement was “a huge positive, because I was looking for somebody pretty motivated,” he says.

It helped, too, that the demanding schedule he quickly had to fill perfectly suited her needs: weekly 24-hour and 16-hour shifts.

“I knew she’d be very disciplined. I was impressed,” Nahrstedt says. “When I’m interviewing for employees, I’m thinking: Who can I train to work for me, who will fit in well with the group? It was a positive to have someone dedicated to their routine and what they wanted to accomplish. It was a great fit.”

Gymnast by Day, PA by Night

Gebeshian stays fit, training up to four days a week, up to 20 hours total. But that’s “very minimal,” she says—far less time than most elite gymnasts devote to training. So, she adds, “I try to be as efficient as possible.”

Armenia doesn’t contribute toward her training and transportation expenses. “I’ve done it all on my own,” she says, down to planning workouts on spreadsheets soon after returning home from those long shifts in the OR.

Gebeshian did recently receive help from a volunteer gymnastics coach, Levon Karakhanyan, an Armenian-American. A childhood friend, choreographer Nicole Langevin, plotted her floor routine at a discounted rate, and Langevin’s husband, Darek Leiner, condensed three hours of Gebeshian’s preferred music into a 90-second arrangement in dubstep style to accompany her floor routine for Rio.

When Gebeshian was a child, she looked up to Langevin, who was a fellow gymnast at the Massachusetts Gymnastics Center (MGC) outside Boston. They reconnected in 2015 as Rio became real. Turns out that Langevin had also admired Gebeshian, who is seven years her junior.

"I remember looking over one day and seeing this muscle-bound 10-year-old doing things like a 'double-back' flip that I'd just learned," says Langevin. "I realized that I should watch her for a few years. I knew she'd do great things."

Gebeshian's father, Hagop, had an inkling, too. When his daughter was five, he brought her to the local YMCA "to keep her busy," he says, but was told that she merited more advanced gymnastics instruction. That led them to MGC, where, through age 18, she trained five days a week.

Only after she won state championships and earned a Division I athletic scholarship to gymnastics powerhouse the University of Iowa, did her father grasp her Olympic potential.

To Armenia With Love

Hagop will accompany his daughter on the nearly 5,000-mile trip to Rio from Boston, nearly the distance he covered when he immigrated to Boston from Lebanon many years ago. That's where he was born, in the Bekaa Valley town of Anjar—an Armenian-majority area settled by refugees from the Turkish genocide against Armenians in 1915. In Anjar, there is a memorial to Musa Dagh, a mountain in southern Turkey where Hagop's parents, who survived the massacre, had lived.

Hagop has told Houry about the family's roots there and further back in time, in Armenia proper, but she'd like to learn more. She's traveled twice to Armenia, and she joined St. Gregory of Narek Armenian Orthodox Church soon after settling in Cleveland. She's gotten involved in several social groups in the church, and the Armenian language, once her mother tongue, is slowly returning. But because of those 24-hour Sunday shifts, Gebeshian can't attend worship services routinely. Fortunately, Ehredt has found a spiritually fulfilling and enthusiastic community at St. Gregory as well. Gebeshian jokingly calls her fiancé an "Armenian by choice".

"He's helping bring me back to my culture," she says. "Now, the opportunity to compete for Armenia has brought me back to my roots. In Cleveland, there's a great Armenian community that's supportive of what I'm doing."

"I remember looking over one day and seeing this muscle-bound 10-year-old doing things like a 'double-back' flip that I'd just learned. I realized that I should watch her for a few years. I knew she'd do great things."

—Nicole Langevin, owner of Precision Choreography, gymnastic coach and former elite gymnast




So, too, is Cleveland Clinic. After qualifying for Rio, Gebeshian was recognized and asked to stand at a meeting, and she was recruited to sign autographs at an Olympic-themed office picnic. Just before she departed for Rio on August 1, the hospital held a cake reception send-off in her honor and will host a watch party during her competition.

“To be a PA and an Olympian—that’s kind of cool,” Nahrstedt says of Gebeshian. He adds that some of the qualities she exhibits at work serve her well as an athlete, too. “She’s very task-oriented and pays attention to all the little things. She’s got a very dedicated skill set, and is very good with patients.”

He says that “it’ll be extra special” to watch the Olympics on television, knowing that his colleague will be competing. For Moceanu, “with Houry on the radar, I’ll watch to see how she does, because I have a personal relationship with her.”

Gebeshian is rightly proud of her accomplishment, acknowledging the obvious in stating, “Not everyone can say they’re an Olympian.”

But, like the PA in scrubs who ushers patients into parenthood, the jumping, running, swinging, reaching gymnast plans to cheer on fellow Olympic athletes after her own competitions end.

“I’m really looking forward to soaking in the entire experience,” she says. “I want to watch people make their dreams come true.” 



HILLEL KUTTLE is a Baltimore-based freelance writer and editor who has written about PAs and healthcare for many years. He can be reached by [email](#).



Gebeshian with children at Woodward Camp for elite athletes.

PHOTO COURTESY OF HOURY GEBESHIAN

If you are interested in joining Gebeshian as she embarks on her Olympic journey, follow her on social media via [Facebook](#), [YouTube](#) and [@HouryGebeshian](#) on Instagram and Twitter. Contact her via [email](#) if you’d like to contribute to her GoFundMe campaign.