

Shailene Woodley of Simi Valley stars with George Clooney in 'The Descendants'

By Karen Lindell

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Shailene Woodley is a person of substance — but not all substances.

She cannot stand plastic.

"I just think it's awful," said the Simi Valley TV-movie actress, 20. "I haven't drank from a water bottle in over two years, for health as well as for environment reasons. I use Mason jars for my water."

She also eats all-organic food, buys in bulk, attends sustainability conferences, studies herbalism, doesn't miss her weekly trip to a local farmers market, watches everything she throws away rather than just recycling, savors time outdoors — and absolutely melts around trees.

"Trees do something to me," she said. "I'm just so madly in love with trees. They're so special in my heart."

Meet Woodley, the environmentalist.

You might already know her as teen mom Amy Juergens on the ABC Family drama "The Secret Life of the American Teenager." She's also been in a slew of other TV shows since she was 5½ and this year is earning major film festival kudos — and Oscar buzz — for her role as the angst-addled teen daughter of George Clooney's character in the Fox Searchlight film "The Descendants." The movie, directed by Alexander Payne ("Sideways," "Election"), premiered at the Telluride Film Festival in September and opens in limited release in Los Angeles and New York today before rolling out to other cities.

Woodley's dutiful answers to obligatory questions about working with Clooney reveal that she's, well, even a celebrity of substance.

"He's so down-to-earth, giving and generous, such a good guy," she said. "He's a guy from Kentucky with a heart of gold who has been given a generous amount of wealth and power and used it in the most positive ways."

She bristles at terms like "star" and "celebrity."

"To me the word 'movie star' is more than being an actor, more than being a source of entertainment," she said. "It's about who you are as a human being, what you give in a philanthropic way, like George Clooney, for example, or Paul Newman, who are phenomenal actors and incredibly philanthropic men."

Woodley, who turned 20 on Tuesday, is using her burgeoning fame to spread the word about her passion for the environment.

"I'm a big activist when it comes to teaching myself as well as others what it's like to be an indigenous earthling," Woodley said.

She and her mother, Lori Woodley, a longtime Ventura County school counselor, have started a charity, All It Takes, that focuses on the environment, health and eradicating bullying, Lori Woodley said.

The charity takes children from different middle school cliques to a camp where they learn to trust and accept one another despite their differences.

"And we teach them about what they can do at a young age to start living a more sustainable life," Shailene Woodley said.

Because of her work with All It Takes, Woodley in October 2010 was one of four young celebrities to win Variety's Power of Youth Award, bestowed for contributions to charitable causes.

ON THE SIMI SCENE

Woodley was born in Simi Valley, lived in Palmdale for five years, then moved back to Simi Valley at the beginning of fifth grade. She attended Township Elementary School and Valley View Middle School in Simi Valley and Los Cerritos Middle School in Thousand Oaks. She graduated in 2009 from Simi Valley High School.

"The middle of junior year was when I booked the TV show ("Secret Life"), so my principal created a special arrangement where my English teacher would come to my house and bring me my homework from all my other classes," she said. "I got to walk with my class in '09."

Woodley's parents are divorced, and she lives in Simi Valley with her mother and younger brother, Tanner, 17, who attends Santa Susana High School.

Woodley acknowledged that she's not the most loyal Simi Valley resident. "My house is here, but my best friend is in Studio City, so I pretty much live with her more than I live at home because it's so convenient workwise."

You might see her on a trail, however.

"Every chance I get I'm outdoors. I really like the hills in Simi for hiking," she said.

Woodley starting acting at age 5, without any grand ambitions.

"When you're 5 you kind of want to try everything," she said. "I just did it and loved it, and it was fun and a hobby. My friends would go to soccer practice, I'd go to an audition, and we'd reconvene in the neighborhood. I still don't think of it as me being an actor. I just consider it my art, and I'm an artist."

ACTING 'CHOPS'

She's been receiving kudos for her artistic abilities in "The Descendants." The film, with a script by Payne, Nat Faxon and Jim Rash, adapted from Kauai Hart Hemmings' novel, is about a man who lives in Hawaii (Clooney) and his daughters coping with loss, tragedy and one another when his wife ends up in a coma after a water-skiing accident.

Woodley described her character, Alexandra, as "a 17-year-old going through her angsty period in life. Through a really tragic scenario she has to learn how to be vulnerable for the first time and grow up and see her dad as a human being instead of as this creature she thinks she can control."

Hemmings said Woodley "absolutely soared as Alex. As an actress she is relaxed, intuitive. You don't feel like you're watching a performance."

Payne, in an interview on Anne Thompson's Hollywood blog, said Woodley "has chops but still reads like an actual honest-to-God kid. A lot of people you audition who have chops are too polished. And a lot of people who aren't polished at all don't have the chops. So thank God I found her."

In his review of the film, Peter Debruge of Variety called Woodley "a revelation in the role of Alex, displaying both the edge and depth the role demands." A.O. Scott of The New York Times described her performance as "one of the most insightful and unaffected depictions of a real American teenager in recent memory."

Honors are rolling in. At the Hollywood Film Festival in October, Woodley was one of seven breakout actors honored with the Spotlight Award, and Clooney won actor of the year. At the Gotham Independent Film Awards in New York City to be held at the end of November, "The Descendants" has been nominated for best ensemble cast and best feature, and Woodley for breakthrough actor.

Jim Burke, executive producer of "The Descendants," said when he first met Woodley after seeing a tape of her audition, she was on hiatus from "Secret Life" and had moved to New York for a few months to take a job at American Apparel.

"It struck me as something a person not on a hit TV show would do — and I loved it," he said. "Despite her career choice, she insisted on being part of the real world."

HEART IN HAWAII

Woodley said she loved how "human" and "raw" the "Descendants" script was. And filming on location in Hawaii was a life-changing experience.

"I really didn't learn about anything myself when it came to playing this role," she said, "but I opened and I shifted, transformed as a human being, being on Hawaii for four months surrounded by such positive people" and natural beauty.

She plans to move there next year.

"I'm not a giant fan of the smog-filled air that we call L.A.," she said. "Hopefully by the end of January, I will have my home in Hawaii, a small studio. Hawaii is where my heart is."

She had never been to Hawaii before filming "The Descendants."

"I'm a huge outdoor person, so the fact that there is a limitless abundance of oxygen and trees is amazing," she said. "There's so many things you can do outdoors on a daily basis, and everything grows there. Kauai is definitely where I will be raising my naked babies picking avocados off trees."

