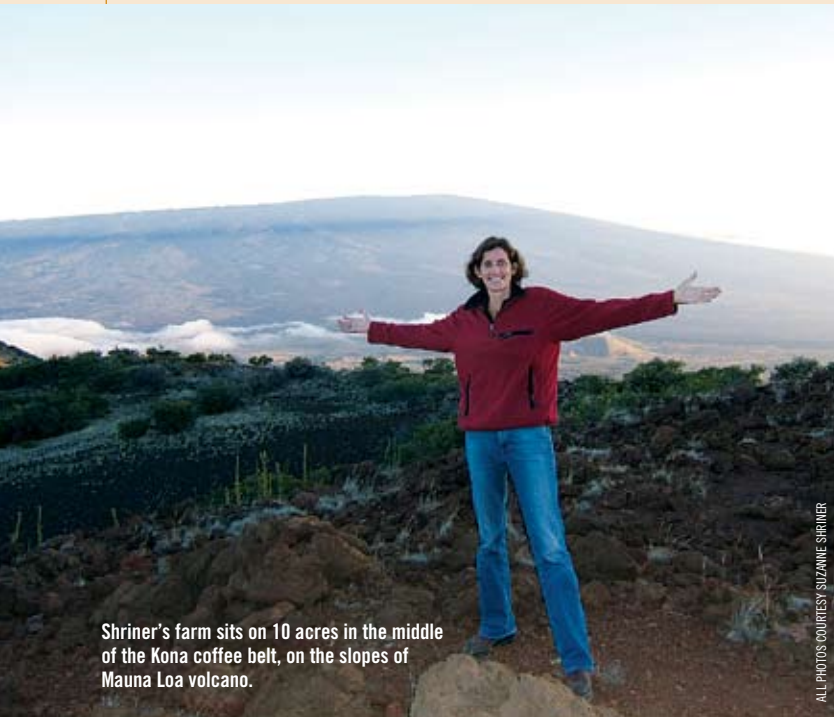


Treasure Island

*Suzanne Shriner '89 mines
Hawaii's rich soil,
yielding premium Kona coffee*

BY BLYTHE BERNHARD



Shriner's farm sits on 10 acres in the middle of the Kona coffee belt, on the slopes of Mauna Loa volcano.

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY SUZANNE SHRINER

Three years ago, Suzanne Shriner '89 traded the corporate grind for the coffee grind when she moved to Kona, Hawaii, to run her parents' 10-acre coffee and macadamia nut farm. Each morning, she slips into her work uniform—cargo shorts, tank top, and flip flops—before heading out to the fields.

“This is where I want to be,” says Shriner. “In Hawaii you really feel a close connection to the universe. At night I can see an incredible array of stars. The air I breathe is fresh and smells like flowers. I think it brings us closer to who we really are as people.”

Connecting with the environment always has been important to Shriner, a political science major and Orange County native who started her career in Los Angeles as an environmental paralegal at ARCO and worked her way up to environmental engineer, helping refineries and gas stations manage water and air pollution programs. “My job,” she says, “was to keep a messy business as clean as possible.”

When the company offered to promote Shriner to management nine years later, she bowed out. A pending job offer as an environmental consultant in Guam and the related warm weather, travel, and new culture was too appealing. She worked on the Pacific island for six years, also earning a master's degree in environmental engineering from the University of Guam.

Then came news that Shriner's mother had been diagnosed with ovarian cancer. Bill and Diane Shriner, who moved to Hawaii to grow coffee soon after their daughter's graduation from CMC, needed help running the business during the crisis (Diane is now in remission).



Lions' Gate coffee is grown on 3,000 heirloom trees, ranging from 60 to 100 years old. Ripe from September through December, each tree is hand-picked several times during the season. The coffee cherries are pulped and processed immediately to prevent spoilage. The wet beans are dried to preserve the flavor, milled to remove the parchment skin, graded, and roasted. It takes about seven pounds of cherries to yield one pound of roast.

Suzanne traded her slide rule for a shovel, joining her parents and grandparents at the Lions' Gate Kona Coffee and Macadamia Nut Farm. She manages the farm's financial affairs and Internet sales, and also spends time roasting coffee and nurturing the earth. "If you don't appreciate your land, your coffee won't taste as good," she says.

Using her problem-solving skills as an environmental engineer, Shriner works to improve the land through organic principles: farming without pesticides or chemical fertilizers. The plants are healthier, the soil is more fertile, and the premium Kona coffee tastes better, she says.

Visitors to the farm and its bed-and-breakfast take free tours to learn about the caring agricultural techniques. "It comes down to a respect for the environment and a respect that transcends the land and goes out to the community," she says.

The simple life suits Shriner. She rarely visits clothing stores or restaurants, doesn't own a television, and is building her own tropical house with natural materials.

Flowing from indoors to outdoors,



the house design includes a 600-square-foot deck, bamboo floors, and fixed-open windows to take advantage of the breezes. Much of the furniture is handmade with wood from sustainable farms in Bali.

Shriner's home sits on 5.5 acres of coffee fields, also including avocado, mango, and orange trees. She describes life on the Big Island as richer and deeper than any vacation can provide. Every night after toiling in the fields, Shriner heads down to the beach to race outrigger canoes by moonlight.

When friends and customers say they envy her letting go of the comforts of corporate life, Shriner tells them that anybody can take that leap. "If you want to live your dream," she

says, "give up the extraneous things. Every time I've taken that jump it was hard—a huge adjustment. But in the end I've come out so much richer."

The challenging scholastic and social life at CMC prepared Shriner to take those risks.

"At CMC, one way or another you're going to have to push yourself," Shriner says. "I graduated knowing that, even if I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life, I had the confidence to know it was going to work out. It's a great college for teaching people how far they can go, which is limitless."

To learn more about Suzanne Shriner's farm or read her blog, visit www.coffeeofkona.com.

Blythe Bernhard is a reporter for the Orange County Register.