



SHARI SPIKES

A peek behind the curtain for a rare glimpse of the Northbay's top-rated radio personality

By S.A. Jernigan

A familiar voice melts the air waves in Sonoma County. It's the alternately sultry....or, effervescently sunny tones of Shari, KZST-FM's mid-day personality. She's been a part of our days for so long and yet who really knows much about her? So I asked for an interview.

Arriving in my office with her enormous imitation fur-covered purse, you immediately know that the phrase "personality" is not just a job description with Shari but, rather, a defining quality of hers. As she settles in to tell me about her background, she offers me a choice of cookies she's brought to share. I munch, she talks.

Since I already know she's originally from San Francisco, I first ask about her folks and she tells me that her mom's from N. Carolina and then animatedly describes her time in the Army where she traveled to Japan and even danced in the USO, and Dad was from Texas. Shari spent her early years in private school, entering Drew College Preparatory at the age of 12 and graduating early at 15 (15!). From there, she had a scholarship to the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and Academy of Music, studying classical piano and flute for over 7 years.

Her parents met as members of a church choir which performed Handel's Messiah with the San Francisco Symphony each Christmas season and so it seems Shari's life has always been filled with music. Her father died while she was in her 20's but made certain to leave her some money dedicated to continuing her education. His bequest made it possible for her to study in London for nearly half a year through a program sponsored by the Santa Rosa Junior College, this following her earlier studies at San Francisco's City College where she took coursework in psychology as well as marketing and advertising.

Living in a flat just blocks from Harrod's, Shari embraced being a Londoner, drinking in her English experience and reveling in the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity her father had provided for her. Indeed, she enjoyed Europe fully also taking big enthusiastic gulps of France, Italy and Switzerland during her time abroad and especially savoring a timely trip to Berlin just after the historic wall fell -- arriving back home in the Bay area with a piece of it carefully wrapped in her luggage.

Creative pursuits have ultimately been the rudder steering Shari's course over the years and as she "tried on" various endeavors, she ultimately realized she's genuinely a "people person" through and through. And so it was that based on her natural charisma coupled with a lucky turn of events, she landed a radio internship and subsequently hosted "Studio Cafe Live" on Cafe Radio, learning her new craft on a makeshift board cobbled together with consumer audio electronics. She was given the 7 p.m. - midnight slot for an entire year -- sans pay, mind you. And this while holding down a regular f/t job in the advertising arena. "But, I didn't care....I came alive each night at 7:00!"

Subsequently Shari had a brief stint at K-TIDE, and then came knocking on KZST's door "long before I was ready," she confides, as she laughs and rolls her expressive eyes. She began volunteering at the top-rated regional station and was eventually offered a very p/t position, 3 days a week, where she initially was only permitted to say alternately "KZST" and "pillow talk" on the air. A short time later, Brent Farris, KZST's longtime drive-time personality (who also serves as Program Director for the station), told her she could now say "This is Shari." After about a month, she was offered a regular full-time position with the station and returned to a slot she was very accustomed to, 7 p.m. - midnight. But at least she was now getting paid.

Two years later, Shari was promoted by Brent to the 9 a.m. - 2:00 p.m. slot and she's remained in that time period for nearly a decade now. Ambitious to learn all she could about her chosen vocation, Shari also had the opportunity to be on-air weekends on San Francisco's KISS-FM for a year or so, initially invited to apply for the p/t position by their morning jock (jockette?), Renel.

Several years ago, and Shari remembers it well, "Brent came in to the studio while I was still on the air and, of course, I wondered what was up. He said, 'Do you know who I'm looking at? The #1 rated on-air personality in Sonoma County!'" Yup. The industry-revered Arbitron ratings book had arrived and Shari had leapfrogged past her KZST mentor to capture the top-rated position and has remained in that same #1 spot the majority of the ratings seasons since.

"Brent's been soooooo good to me. After all, he not only gave me my chance but I've absolutely learned everything I know from him," she enthuses.

Believing her smile can actually be heard on the airwaves, Shari's spent time in front of the camera too. Runway modeling in San Francisco and London as well as her time as a Traffic and Entertainment Reporter at the local TV station, KFTY, have prepared her for yet another new opportunity. She's recently joined KPIX's (CBS) weekend morning news show as the "Music Diva" and "Northbay Insider" with spots a few times a month to start. And while she says she'd love to someday be a featured entertainment reporter, she continues to revel in her radio station life surrounded by music--even if it is the music of others. "Someday, I'm going to be the one creating the music again....yes, that time will come," she nods emphatically.

With her larger-than-life presence and contagious joyfulness, Shari's also a sought-after emcee at local events including the Russian River Jazz Festival, regional county fairs, and Rodney Strong Vineyards Concert Series where she often introduces top name visiting musical talent. She also hosts Sunday mornings on KZST's sister station, KJZY-FM.

Surprised at what a homebody she's become since buying her Victorian home locally, Shari's personal life



is defined by her other great loves: her Mom & 4 kitties. She talks about all of them on-air regularly and she becomes downright misty-eyed when speaking of her beloved mother, Gladys, telling me at length about the evolution of their very close relationship, declaring "She's truly my very best bud." Another important aspect of Shari's private life involves her ongoing devotion to counseling young women struggling with substance abuse.

Now clearly at home in her own skin after a life filled with exploring herself and the cultural world around her, Shari gives all the credit for her success professionally as well as personally to Gladys. "She's just the most wonderful role model for me: intelligent, strong-willed, proud, happy, and just very, very....good. I only hope I'm living up to her incredible example." Oh and as for Mom, she's definitely proud of her only daughter. And with darned good cause too, don't you think? (And that's not just the cookies talkin'...)

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"The best thing about the future is that it comes one day at a time."

-Abraham Lincoln-

Why do we take risks?

By Elizabeth Thompson

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The other day I was honored to facilitate a dinner with the leaders of our communities. Educators, businessmen, artists, politicians, and filmmakers came together to discuss the vocation of being human. These people came to this dinner inspired to share their life's stories with students at Santa Clara University in a course I teach called Let Your Life Speak. As college students grapple with questions such as What provides me meaning in my life?, How do I know what I am passionate about?, How will I find work that integrates what I love with financial security?, How do I find what makes me happy, and not what makes my parents' happy?, this course provides them with the opportunity to hear the stories of people who have taken risks to pursue their passions. These life stories engage the students because of their ability to connect with the subtle nuances of shared experiences.

One man at the dinner, a well-known photographer of world leaders, shared his story of working at a mind-numbing job after college. In order to pay off his loans he remained with the position while pursuing his interests in photography on the side. Seeking a mentor, he decided one day to search the phone directory for Ansel Adams, the man who became famous for his black and white photographs of nature. Adams not only personally answered the phone, but also invited him to his home in Monterey where he provided artistic advice and encouraged him to pursue a career in photography. Now this man is internationally acclaimed for his captivating portraits of world leaders such as Mother Theresa, Pope John Paul II, Mikhail Gorbachev and Margaret Thatcher.

The former mayor of the city of Santa Clara shared her childhood growing up in a family passionate about public service. Her parents raised their children somewhat atypically, especially in today's world where children are often herded from one activity to the next, from music camp to soccer camp and back. Instead her parents made it clear to their children that they did not need to work as teenagers, despite the fact that the family could have used the money. Rather, her parents suggested they cultivate their interests, become avid readers, pursue their curiosities and imagination, and spend time doing the activities they loved. Years later this woman found herself quitting her job as editor of Sunset Magazine to become politically involved in the city in which she had decided to raise her children.

A businessman known for

his work in executive management within international technology companies shared with the group at dinner, that he rarely stays in any one position for more than 16 months. This man craves learning, exploring, and change.

Each person at the dinner had radically different stories to tell, but I was struck by the common theme of risk-taking among them. What gave the photographer the confidence to seek out Ansel Adams, the pre-eminent photographer of our time? What gave the mayor the confidence to quit her job with Sunset Magazine for politics? What drives the businessman to seek out new experiences every 16 months? What gave me, a twenty-five year old just beginning her professional career, the confidence to bring these leaders together and to be thanked by many afterwards for the inspiring evening?

What gives people the ability to take what many might call daunting risks to pursue their passions? As I write personally from experience about my own developing confidence, I wonder if there are similar themes among the people whose stories I shared. Just three years ago, I would have been disbelieving and overwhelmed if I were told I would be hosting such a dinner, and yet over time I have developed a trust in myself that allowed me to bring these community leaders together to discuss the vocation of being human. This trust in myself extends to trust in my interests, talents, and strengths, while also honoring my doubts and weaknesses. Combined with this trust is a sense of meaning in my work, as well as a sense of what drives and excites me... cont. in March 2004

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