



THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Sonoma Woman Blooms

by Rhoann Ponseti

"I was a straight 'A' student and valedictorian of my high school class," says Sierra Hart. To all outward appearances, she has always had it all together. After all, she's a single mom, Director of Design for Allen Land Design and serves on the City of Sebastopol Design Review Board. She's young, she's smart. She's a passionate and knowledgeable leader on sustainability issues. She's got it made, right?

Just ask her. "There's so much (blankety-blank) pressure on women. If you try to be a good mom and you ditch your career you're judged. If you focus on career you're judged for not taking good enough care of your children. It sounds like a cliché but it's true; if you can't work full-time and have dinner on the table and be nurturing, you're just not good enough!

"My daughter, Icelia, is almost nine. Her name comes from the Mexican Indian language, which is her dad's heritage; he is Chicano. I love her. It just gets more and more fascinating and complex and satisfying all at the same time. You have this baby, and you have to learn all this stuff. Really looking back you think 'that was easy.' It just keeps getting more complicated and more fun. She and I communicate a lot like friends. She's very talkative and articulate. She can sit down and have hours-long conversations with adults. I do have to be Mom and keep the structure of our lives together. She's so smart and so thoughtful she definitely gives me inspiration. My life is mostly about her, which has been a big shift; about having a home and a family environment for her. I work full time and she spends all day at school and day care. So there's even guilt about that—but when I really look at the focus of my life, she's there and everything else just comes next."

Sierra herself is a child of the hippie, back-to-the-land movement. "I see all the time the ways I am like my parents and what they taught me; from values like family and what it means to be



a family, honoring family time, cooking meals together, a work ethic, finishing what you start. Their whole hippie choice to live a simple life in a small town has definitely connected me to nature and who I am now; connection to the earth and environmentalism, college and career-wise. I have a huge sense of responsibility that I learned from my parents. Sometimes that's a burden. They are great listeners, open-minded, loving, thoughtful, caring. I am so close to them. I talk to them 2-3 times per week. They are still married, still together," she shares, with love and pride in her voice.



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How do you create a sense of family when you're a working single mom? Like so many others, Sierra says, "I just do it. Because of my upbringing I know that you create family because you are family."

EVERY DAY YOU LOVE EACH OTHER, EAT TOGETHER, SUPPORT EACH OTHER'S NEEDS.

You do the things that create a sense of family in any family; like listening, helping, having fun together, making time to relax together, having tea in bed on Sunday mornings, walking down to the Farmer's Market, hiking, swimming. It all boils down to a certain kind of holding —holding a family feeling that creates the container that is family. And I live less than two hours from my parents, which creates even more sense of family. My daughter has a relationship still with her father, who moved here fairly recently."

Since family plays such an important role in Sierra's life, it's no surprise that her career as a landscape designer and Director of Design at Santa Rosa-based Allen Land Design involves a family; one that is able to create that sense within their business structure. As Sierra tells it, "The Allen's are like a second family. Jeff and Anne-Marie's approach is to empower the people who work with them. Some of it is chemistry, timing, the mix of personalities, how our strengths complement each other and how we were able to work together to change the direction of the company. How we do things and how we offer services to clients came together pretty naturally. I think it's because they are open people. The free rein isn't always the most comfortable position but it worked for me and for all of us. We have grown and built the design studio. We are a design/build company. We built up our repertoire of design services and started landing bigger and more professional projects, including Sonoma Mountain Village, a major sustainable commer-

cial and residential redevelopment project, and renovation of the Fountaingrove Agilent Campus as well as work with Nordby Construction. We are proud of all our projects. They don't have to be big names for us to be proud of them!"

Sierra has a strong sense of community and activism. Also strong is her sense of knowing intuitively what is right, and what path feels like the right one. "When I first moved to Sebastopol, I saw a flyer for a community garden volunteer day. I thought, 'I'm going to go to this.' I met a bunch of people creating a community skate park/garden. My daughter and I helped clean up the site and I was recruited to lead the design team to contribute the sustainable landscape design and site planning from a permaculture perspective. I worked with members of the skate park organization, City of Sebastopol and the Arts Center. The plan was adopted; the process was many months and my time was many hours!"

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"Volunteer work—you never know where it will lead. At a fundraising event for the project I ran into a guy who said 'Oh, the company I work for (Allen Land Design) would probably donate some olive trees to the project.' I looked at their web site and decided, 'This company seems like a really good fit for me. I called them up, said this is who I am, this is how I found you, I'd like to get together and talk to you. So we did. I met Jeff and his wife, Anne-Marie, who was on her way to a dump run in her biodiesel truck. Jeff took me around and asked me all the plant names around the place. I began working with them in May of 2004."



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The backroads of her life began in northern California. “My parents met when they were hippies in the mountains around Willits. It was communal living but not a commune. Because everyone had their own house and land, it worked out well. They moved to a house in town (Willits) when I was three. My dad is an electrical contractor who grew up in a Lansing, Michigan, an Irish Catholic family. My Mom is a teacher who grew up on Long Island and Manhattan, in a Russian Jewish family. I get guilt from both the Catholic and Jewish sides of the family,” she laughs.

“I have a younger brother, Noah, almost 30. He’s a wine buyer for Whole Foods and is very into wine and viticulture. He lives in SF. I’m right in the middle between where my parents and my brother live.

“I went to UC Santa Cruz at age 17, straight out of Willits HS. I took this class called “Earth: A Habitable Planet?” which inspired me to major in Environmental Studies. When I graduated I had to figure out what to do next, so I decided to be a bartender. I was barely 21 and was into my social life,” she laughs.

“One of my urges was to travel to Central America and stay and work on some experimental farm programs in Costa Rica. It was a time of self-discovery. We harvested coffee, then I helped four families start vegetable gardens. I took time to see other parts of the country, too. “I went to work on an organic farm on the Eel River. It’s a farm and camp for environmental education. Kids and families learn how a farm runs and how to make compost and grow organic vegetables and about the river and the fish and the forest. This is one of my homes away from home where my heart will always be. They called me the “Awesome Blossom Boss.” I did landscape renovations and maintenance and some of my first landscape designs were at the farm. Somehow I discovered the field of Landscape Architecture—I’d never even heard of it. It encompassed all of my experience and interests.

“I had had a few conversations over the years with a wonderful woman my parents knew up north named Susie Dowd, a landscape designer in Sonoma County. I asked if I could come work for her. I got a job for a landscape architect in Sebastopol—this was the first time I was truly living on my own—and I had a three-year-old. I had a ‘moment’ when I broke down and cried and said I couldn’t do it. I ended up working for Susie and she has been a wonderful mentor to me,” Sierra states with gratitude.

Sierra’s day-to-day design work inspires her. “The beginning of the design process is getting together with the client at their property, hearing their story of what they need, want, envision, will use. We provide guidance and ideas or we provide refinement to their ideas. That’s the really exciting part—to meet and form the vision with the client. There may be more meetings with engineers or architects. We create a design concept, pull together imagery, plant and material palettes, the layout, style, shape, colors of the landscape. Commercial landscape design is usually very different from residential, involving a lot of detail and paperwork. We are design/build—it’s also exciting to see the designs get built.

Sierra’s environmental ideals find application in her work. “The other exciting part of my work is sustainability—bringing the environmental factors into the design. The Sonoma Mountain Village project is highly sustainable, incorporating things that go all the way back to my college days, like green building.”

The icing on the cake to a happy and productive life is Sierra Hart’s pride in serving her community on the City of Sebastopol Design Review Board. “I was encouraged to apply. I interviewed with City Council, who unanimously appointed me. I knew people in city government because of the volunteer skate park project. I love it. It’s so fun. Once I see a set of plans I realize that I have an important perspective to offer. And I get to see everything that’s coming to town,” Sierra states with wonder at how good her life has become.