

Marda Stoliar - Living a Life that Takes the Cake

by K_Guice

Marda Stoliar's life is one of international intrigue. A native Oregonian, she has seen all corners of the world and brought back to Bend the secret recipe to a happy, successful and fulfilling life.

At age 65, the former model, high-end shoe designer and manufacturer; has become a highly sought after culinary advisor to individuals and businesses all over the world as the director and chief instructor of the International School of Baking.

While her travels took her from Hong Kong to Paris to Italy and Taipei; Stoliar said ultimately there was no place like Oregon.

At 18, she left her childhood home in Portland, Oregon and took a leap of faith across the United States landing in New York City. There she attended school full time at Pratt University studying fashion design and worked to help pay her way through college. She did everything from modeling to teaching others dress patterns and draping.

"My parents helped as much as they could, but I had a sister who was also in college and New York was very expensive," she said. By her sophomore year she began working in the shoe industry.

It was a lot of hard work, but despite her demanding school schedule and working a great number of hours, she graduated in three and a half years.

"At 22, I incorporated and opened my own shoe company called Marda & Associates," she said. "I had an office in the Empire State Building." Looking back she says those were exciting times.

She traveled between the states and Europe for business, along the way she met David. He was a VP for Mitsubishi Shoji in Tokyo and has quite a unique history himself. He is a Jewish holocaust survivor and also the sole survivor of the Struma, the ship that sunk while sailing from Romania to Palestine in 1942.

David sent her a plane ticket to visit him in Tokyo and the rest is history. They were married a short time later.

“I moved to Tokyo when I married my husband,” said Stoliar. “David had a son from a previous wife who had passed away and I adopted him when he was 15.” She said previously they spoke French in their home. “When I moved they switched over to English.”

Though she is an international traveler, Stoliar says she doesn’t really speak many languages. “If I have to, I speak enough Japanese to get by. I speak French when I have to. I can read Italian and I can understand Taiwanese.” However, she admits that since her husband speaks eight languages, she has always relied upon him to serve as her interpreter.

In 1972 the couple opened a shoe manufacturing company called Koala. There they helped create and produce shoes for huge names in both the fashion and film world. “We were the agents for Brown Clarks of England. We did all kinds of athletic shoes for Gucci Italy. We also did all of the Levi shoes for the Bruce Jenner collection when he was the great star.”

“Our company also made Buster Brown,” said Stoliar. “I remember sitting in the office speaking to Spielberg almost daily. He wanted the eyes bluer and the finger a little redder.” She is referring to Steven Spielberg who was calling to ensure the quality of the image of E.T. that was on millions of children’s shoes set to be in stores for the opening day of the box office hit E.T. “He was a very nice man, very accessible,” she said. Stoliar both understood and admired his desire for perfection because she too was a perfectionist.

Meanwhile the family, who had been living in France, was planning on buying a home in Oregon. “We needed a domicile in the states or we would have to pay a duty on all of the things we were shipping back.” So, Stoliar called her mother, who still lived in Portland and asked her to buy a home in Oregon.

During one of Stoliar's visits back home her mother recalled how much David has fallen in love with Bend. “So my mother found a home in Bend and it has been home ever since.” However, not in the traditional sense to most people. From 1972 to 1979, they split their time between their little home in Bend and Taipei.

Her voice turns a bit melancholy as she reflects, “It was a time I actually enjoyed. My husband and I would meet each other in the Hong Kong airport and whoever was going home would take the dirty laundry.”

“We were traveling six days a week. We didn't even think about it,” she said. It's hard to imagine Stoliar had any free time, yet during her travels she developed a love for breads and pastries. Her initial intrigue started purely based on her desire to know how things worked.

From there it grew into a passion. “I learned my breads in Venice. A bakery there put up with me for quite a long while,” she jokes. “And I learned my pastries in Paris.” She said no one saw her as a threat. “I was just some shoe designer,” she laughs.

In 1979, the couple sold their home in Taipei and took up permanent residence in Bend. “We then only commuted once a month.”

That same year they opened a bakery. “We had Breads of France from 1979 to 1983,” she said. “We had a staff of 11 and I was the pastry chef.” Stoliar was very particular about her staff. “I trained everybody,” she says with pride. “To this day I still refuse to take trained people.” She says often

times they have learned things the wrong way and it takes too much time to undo the damage that has been done.

It exposed her to what became yet another passion, teaching others. "I love teaching. I have taught courses at the COCC (Central Oregon Community College) for 26 years," she said. "And I have some students that have been with me for the entire 26 years."

In 1984 Stoliar started going to China. "I was the baking consultant for U.S. Wheat," she said. "I was there for 14 years, based out of Hong Kong, but I was traveling all over." She was working with wheat and yeast products. "I was teaching the Chinese in the south to like wheat." It is a region that, at the time, primarily ate rice products.

It was during that stint that she worked with and was trained by the great chocolate maker, Peter Suter, of Switzerland. "Peter really gave me all my knowledge of making chocolate," she says. "He is one of my dearest friends and taught me so much really."

All of that knowledge culminated in 1986 when she opened her International School of Baking. "I think it was '86. Yes, but I had students before that. I finally gave it a name then."

Stoliar speaks with great pride about both her students and the school's kitchen. "It is a professional facility. My oven I have will do 60 baguettes at one time."

Listening to her speak of her students, she comes to life. One near and dear to her has since become her apprentice, Zion Yerman. "She is a well-known muralist, her husband is an E.R doctor," she says. "She decided to learn baking from A to Z and she has really picked it up."

Stoliar credits Yerman for picking up where she leaves off, "she has been a real star and for me it has just been a blessing."

It seems Stoliar looks on all of her students with such enthusiasm, though she says, "I understand I am a mean, nasty teacher." She then admits no one has told her that but she knows she can be tough. She wants her students to get as much out her courses as they can.

Most seem to get a lot more than they bargained for. Mike Kentley is a hardware designer based out of Central Oregon. "He is a major hardware designer, but he is an incredible plated dessert chef." Stoliar brags, "He would like to be a dessert chef in a three-star restaurant and I think he would be brilliant."

Then there are those that come to her that work in the industry. "Lillian Chu owns the Hong Kong Restaurant," Stoliar states. "Lillian has come to me every year for one day for 19 years. She bakes all of her Christmas presents with me and says she learns something new every year."

This year, Stoliar says Lillian is demanding more. "She wants a diploma." So, is she going to get it? "Yes, I'm going to give it to her, but don't tell her. We are going to have a party," she laughs.

In 1999, Stoliar and her husband closed their shoe manufacturing company, Koala. Food became her primary focus. Not only is she teaching individual students, she also serves as a consultant and last year she started working with the U.S. Dairy Export Council in Korea.

No matter what she is doing she says it is the creative process and the people that make her job so enjoyable. "I love consulting because I meet so many different people all of the time," she said. "I love the diversity of it and meeting people from all over the world. I have students from Gahanna, Pakistan, India, Kenya, all over and I tend to get a lot of referrals from past students."

Ultimately, she says, "I like challenges and I like to create. So, it doesn't matter if it is a shoe, someone's kitchen or a cake. I think creative people need that, that creative outlet."

Stoliar says she is truly lucky, "I have done two really interesting things and every day I get up knowing I am going to have a really good day teaching someone something new."

Living in Bend only makes it better. "It is a place I'm proud to say where I live," she says. "I've lived all over the world; Tokyo, Paris and New York. I can go to any of those places anytime I want, but Bend is just a great place to live."

L-R: Marda Stoliar, Zion Yerman, and student Tracy Van Orden

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