

Stina Sayre

MARTHA'S VINEYARD | CAPE & ISLANDS VOICES



ALISON SHAW

I GREW UP IN SWEDEN, IN THE MIDDLE NORTH in a town called Östersund. My dad was an architect, my mother was a homemaker when we were small, and then she worked at the pharmacy in the hospital in our town. My grandfather, who had a bigger influence on me than I thought at the time, was a clothing merchant who had 10 to 15 stores. He came from the business side—he had clothing stores in my hometown, and I worked in those stores growing up. I'd be on the floor selling.

Both my mother and father were artists—my father was an architect and later in life they were both painting, but my mother's father was a professional musician. My father's mother was a painter—my uncles and aunts were painters and musicians.

Windsurfing was a very young sport when I started in 1979. I've always been an outdoors, athletic person, and it started with skiing and skating. Friends that went skiing went windsurfing, and that's how I started . . . Every weekend we had competitions and we would have at least 100 people at each regatta. It was young and exciting—any move you did was brilliant because no one had ever done it before! (laughs)

I was the Swedish champion for a few years. At the same time, I'd go to European championships and world championships in my class, the mistral class. That took me to Thailand, Barbados, Gran Canaria, and Europe, of course . . . It was a great sport, and that's how I met my husband, Nevin, and how my life continued. The first time I met him was at the Mistral World Championship . . . Nevin grew up in Washington, D.C., and Martha's Vineyard was where he spent his summers.

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The first time I came here was in the mid '80s. I was very much at the height of my windsurfing career. We'd come here and windsurf or go sailing out to Squibnocket, and it was gorgeous—you're young and everything is fun, right? It was a fantastic and beautiful place. And compared to where I came from, in many ways, it had huge similarities.

I came to a time in my life where there was an opportunity to change something, where I was wide open to do anything, which is a wonderful place to be. Nevin and I continued competing and continued our travels with World Cup Sailing and the International Regatta. I did that for maybe a year a two, then I was pretty much done with my sailing. It was my everything, but I knew it wasn't the whole me because I have this artistic side. So I became more of an artist than an athlete.

Nevin continued sailing and was very successful, and I would travel with him sometimes. After a while, I bought a knitting machine and traveled with it. I would set up the knitting machine and knit sweaters on the tour and sell them. I called them guilt sweaters: There were a lot of guys who would leave

their wives and kids at home to go on these windsurfing trips, and they would feel really guilty about it. They needed to come back home with something good, and the more expensive it was, the better (laughs). So I capitalized on that a little.

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Before we moved here, we were in Falmouth, and we still had that connection to Martha's Vineyard. My husband became a partner in Fiberspar, which was a company that made windsurfing masts. The business was in Wareham, and we stayed in Falmouth—sort of halfway between work and the

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Vineyard. We spent 12 years in Falmouth, from 1991 to 2003, before we moved to Vineyard Haven.

I started my fashion design business in my home—I did wholesale and everything else from the kitchen table. It's grown slowly, frustratingly slow sometimes, but now I can say with all of that behind me, it worked. That's how life is. Everyone does it differently.

Everyone chooses what they wear. People who say they don't care about fashion—yeah, maybe they don't care about wearing the latest and the greatest, but they still need to look just so.

I'm a designer. I'm not necessarily a dresser. Some people put together their whole outfit, and it's perfect. For me, it's more like a T-shirt, a pair of jeans, a good coat, and I'm on my way.

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People are here on the island for a reason. There are very few people who are here because they just happened to be here. So people are invested in the community and excited about what they do. I wish everyone could be a part of a community where they wake up and they're hungry to do what they're going to do. People struggle everywhere, but even as we struggle, at least we can go out and have beauty in our lives, and I think that's why we stay.

When you go out windsurfing and it's howling, if it's a nor'easter or it's just awful, even in that moment, there is peace and silence. And that's what opens you up if you have pressure and you get into that locked position where you can't do anything. I don't go out in the worst conditions, but before this last hurricane, my son and I went out and it was crazy out there. You're so focused on the elements that everything else is gone. And it opens up that space for being creative again.