



JAMMING *for* JUSTICE

WRITER: MEREDITH LIDARD KLEEMAN PHOTOGRAPHER: AUBRIE PICK

“What was I thinking?” is how Shakirah Simley ’03 remembers her decision to move to California, where she would launch her own jam business and embark on a career as a food justice advocate.

Shakirah didn’t move from New York to San Francisco on a whim — but she didn’t have a plan, either.

“It was crazy,” she laughs. “I just had a gut feeling — I just knew that I wanted to be, I needed to be in California and I’d figure it out when I got there.”

Growing up in Harlem, New York, Shakirah didn’t have access to fresh, affordable produce. As the eldest of four children, she was in charge of grocery shopping and cooking for her family, while her mother worked long hours as a social worker.

Shakirah attended a Harlem elementary school, but received a scholarship to attend St. Hilda’s & St. Hugh’s on the Upper West Side. The private school was roughly two miles from Shakirah’s apartment, but “It almost felt like going to school on the Upper West Side was a world away from where I was growing up,” Shakirah says.

Adjusting to a private school environment was difficult for Shakirah, but with the support of her mother, a strong proponent of education, and her teachers, she worked “really, really hard.” While determining where to attend high school, Shakirah visited several of the local elite private high schools, but realized she would never feel comfortable there. “There is a lot of class segregation in New York City, and I think a lot of that comes to a head in the elite private school matrix,” she says.

Shakirah traveled to Baltimore for an overnight visit at St. Timothy’s. “I loved it,” she says. “I loved the girls, I loved the campus and I loved the teachers.” She also noticed the school’s diverse student population, “which was important to me,” she says. After returning home, Shakirah broke the news to her mother. “I said, ‘Mom, I want to go boarding school,’” she recalls, laughing.

During her four years at St. Timothy’s, Shakirah was heavily involved in extracurricular activities and held several leadership positions, including class president during her junior and senior years, prefect, as well as head of the Social Services Club, and head of the Black Awareness Club — two areas of interest that she would continue to pursue in college. She also played on the school’s basketball team for four years and was a member of the Spider team for three.

Shakirah also received the prestigious St. Timothy’s Trust Prize, awarded by the faculty and students for embodying the truth and trust for which the School stands. “My mom was very proud,” she remembers.

After graduating from St. Timothy’s in 2003, Shakirah attended the University of Pennsylvania, where she majored in cultural anthropology with a minor in urban studies. She was heavily involved in social justice work — following in the footsteps of her grandmother, a member of the Black Panthers, and her mother, who were both social workers. As a co-president of the university’s Student Labor Action Project, Shakirah helped organize the school’s security guards to advocate for better working conditions.

“Working to serve a better good and to help people — that’s always been a part of my life,” she says.

Shakirah was also instrumental in implementing a significant change to the university’s curriculum. As the chairwoman of the school’s Undergraduate Minorities Council and a student representative on the college’s Task Force on Cultural Diversity in the U.S., Shakirah fought to include a cultural diversity requirement as part of the school’s arts and sciences curriculum, and even led a protest outside of a faculty senate meeting to show her support for the requirement.

Shakirah credits St. Timothy’s for instilling in her the confidence to advocate for what she believed in and to take on other challenges as well, like speaking up in a

classroom of 150 students. “I went to high school in an environment where women were listened to and encouraged to speak up and stand up and be leaders,” she says. “I wanted to bring that to college – I felt like that was a really good foundation to have.”

That fearlessness aided in her decision to move to San Francisco with no job, no family and little money, to follow her new passion – sustainability and food justice. Her passion for the latter stems from Shakirah’s work with Just Food, a nonprofit she volunteered with during her fellowship with the New York City Commission on Human Rights, following her graduation from the University of Pennsylvania in 2007.

As a volunteer community chef with Just Food, Shakirah visited low-income neighborhoods to teach residents about eating locally. After working with Just

Food, she felt compelled to continue working in the sustainable food movement, which in many ways had begun in California’s Bay Area.

Shakirah admits that moving across the country was a huge risk, but she believes that the confidence she gained at St. Timothy’s gave her the assurance to trust herself. “I think [listening to your gut] is the most powerful thing that anyone can do,” she says. “And to be honest, that’s worked out extremely well for me.”

After arriving in San Francisco, Shakirah received a job offer to work for the Prevention Institute, a nonprofit that promotes policies and collaborative practices to improve

health and quality of life. As a food and activity associate, Shakirah worked on food and physical activity policy – work that helped deepen her knowledge of food systems.

With fresh, local produce – items that weren’t easily accessible, or affordable, while she was growing up in Harlem – now essentially at her fingertips, Shakirah began tinkering around in her own kitchen. “I was really inspired by the produce, particularly the availability of urban fruit, much of which never gets used,” she explains.

Motivated by the Bay Area’s culture of entrepreneurship, she wanted to start a business to connect more people to their local food shed. Shakirah taught herself canning and jam-making, using produce from farmers markets and her neighborhood fruit trees.

To learn more about starting her own business, Shakirah enrolled in a business course through the Women’s Initiative for Self Employment, a local nonprofit. She gave away jars of her lemon curd and pump-

kin butter to classmates and friends, continuing to refine her technique and improve her recipes.

In the summer of 2009, Shakirah launched her jam company, dubbed Slow Jams after her favorite musical genre and slow production method. She sold her first 50 jars at an underground farmer’s market.

Shakirah gained a small following through that market, and had to change her production methods in order to meet the increased demand and fill the orders of hundreds of customers and several local retailers. A year after moving to San Francisco, Shakirah had transitioned from making jam in her own kitchen to making caseloads in a commercial kitchen run by La Cocina, a business incubator for women from low-income and minority communities.

Shakirah continued working for the Prevention Institute as she built Slow Jams. Her business was taking off, but “It was a really hard time in my life,” she admits. “I would get up early in the morning, pack jam, go to work, come back home, finish jam, answer emails, deal with customers and fill orders. I was probably working 13–14 hour days, seven days a week, just to [run] Slow Jams.”

As a young woman of color running her own artisanal food business, Shakirah gained the attention of local and national media. She was mentioned in *Sunset* magazine, appeared on the Cooking Channel and was featured in a number of San Francisco food blogs.

Just as her jam business was taking off, Shakirah felt that familiar feeling in her gut. Back in 2008 she had felt compelled to move from New York to California to pursue her food passion. A mere two years later, she felt the same pull to travel from San Francisco to Italy – the heart of the slow food movement.

Shakirah applied for a Fulbright scholarship to attend the University of Gastronomic Sciences in northern Italy and mailed her application on the same day she submitted her final business plan for Slow Jams. Beating out thousands of other applicants, Shakirah earned the prestigious scholarship – awarded to just one U.S. citizen a year – to study for a master’s degree in food culture and communications.

Shakirah was forced to put Slow Jams on hold during her year in Italy, a break she desperately needed. “I was working crazy hours; I was exhausted,” she recalls. “[Italy] gave me time to figure out myself. I feel like every woman needs time in her life where she is only accountable to herself and can figure out what she wants, not just professionally, but personally.”

In Italy, Shakirah studied under Italian canners and preservers, which impacted her own jam-making style. “It was a really great learning experience,” she says. “I was able to travel a lot and meet amazing people and immerse myself in something I really love.”

Shakirah returned to San Francisco in 2012 as “a certified gastronome trying to find her place again in the food world,” as she described in her blog. “I came back and said, ‘I don’t want to make jam!’” she recalls. Instead of picking up where she left off with Slow Jams, Shakirah wanted to utilize her knowledge of food systems and background in social justice. She turned to Sam Mogannam, founder and owner of Bi-Rite Market, the first retailer to carry Slow Jams back in 2009.

At the time, Mogannam was preparing to open a second Bi-Rite location. “She pitched this idea to help us with the new store, integrating into the new community where we were going to be moving into,” he explains.

Mogannam hired Shakirah to serve as the community coordinator for Bi-Rite. “Having grown up in Harlem, she understood the neighborhood we were moving into more intimately than I ever could,” he says. “She has a way of just talking to people that makes them feel comfortable.”

As Bi-Rite’s community coordinator, Shakirah manages the market’s community outreach programs and develops new programs aimed at increasing access to healthy food across San Francisco. She’s still making jam too. As the market’s canner-in-residence, Shakirah develops recipes for Bi-Rite’s PUBLIC Label line using seasonal, local ingredients and teaches preserving classes at 18 Reasons, Bi-Rite’s educational nonprofit.

The self-described canner, educator, advocate, gastronome and entrepreneur added another achievement to her resume this year – she was included on *Zagat’s* “30 Under 30” list of San Francisco’s Food World Up-and-Comers. “It’s really nice to be recognized by your industry for your efforts,” she says. “There aren’t very many women of color who are my age and have a platform, and who can advocate and be listened to – that’s really rare.”

Shakirah admits that when she initially ventured into the male-dominated foodie scene, she faced a lot of racism, sexism and classism. “People didn’t believe that I could create such a high quality artisanal jam product,” she says. The critics might have been too much for her, “if I were a weaker woman, or didn’t have a strong compass and fearlessness,” she explains.

Shakirah plans to continue her work in the sustainable food and food justice movements. She hopes to open her own café and retail space that focuses on freshly made preserves and baked goods, and serves as a training ground for local, under-served youth interested in culinary careers. “This is the industry that I love, and I’m going to find a way to stay in it and work my way through it and up,” she says. ♦

“I went to high school in an environment where women were listened to and encouraged to... stand up and be leaders... I felt like that was a really good foundation to have.”

SHAKIRAH SIMLEY '03



Shakirah Simley prepares artisanal jams and preserves using fresh and locally sourced foods. Visit www.birite.com/publiclabel for more on her recipes and products.

