

# The Oregonian

**Through the death of her father and a battle with mental illness, Mana Shim perseveres**

**By Jamie Goldberg**

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[Mana Shim](#) kept peering down at her phone as she sat alone in her dark apartment in Vaxjo, Sweden. She would turn 26 at midnight and was instinctively waiting for her dad to call to wish her a happy birthday. She longed to hear his voice.

A professional soccer player, Mana had left the [Portland Thorns](#) after four and a half seasons to join Vaxjo DFF, but had been feeling isolated and achingly homesick during her first month in Sweden. Her coach had been fired shortly after her arrival in August 2017 and she had yet to form much of a bond with her new teammates. It was the first time she had been this far from her support system since being diagnosed with bipolar disorder and she was acutely aware of the 7,000 miles that separated her from her family in Hawaii.

She knew exactly what her dad, Sri Shim, would say to comfort her. He had told her the same thing time and again.

*Do what you have to do. Home will always be here. I will always be here.*

She so desperately wanted to hear those words on Sept. 25, 2017 that she stayed up waiting for a phone call that she knew would never come. When she came out of her trance and recognized what she was doing, she lost it. In that moment, the weight of it all was too much to bear.

## A DEVASTATING LOSS

Something felt out of kilter from the moment Mana woke up on Jan. 9, 2016.

She was exhausted and a bit sick, but managed to drag herself out of her apartment in Portland to spend the day with her then-girlfriend and two close friends, Marianne and Noah Zuckerman. But by the late afternoon, she had crawled back into bed.

She was half asleep when her sister, Alyson, called. She ignored it. It was only when Alyson called again that she picked up.

Sri and his stepson, Trey Albrecht, had been free diving and spearfishing 600 feet offshore from Lanikai Beach, on the east shore of Oahu, when they were run over by a 24-foot Zodiac

boat driven by Sai Hansen. Hansen managed to haul Trey to shore after the crash, but Sri remained submerged in the ocean.

It was a chaotic scene when Alyson and Mana's older sister, Lauren Kawahakui, arrived at the beach. Friends and family had descended on the scene and the Coast Guard, Ocean Safety and the Honolulu Fire Department were actively searching for Sri. Alyson could hardly hear Mana's voice amidst the commotion. She promised to call back with more information and hung up. The sudden deafening silence was overwhelming.

The last flight of the day from Portland to Hawaii had already taken off. There was nothing Mana could do but wait.

Her dad had always embraced meditation and yoga, and encouraged her to do the same. So, Mana began to meditate. She already felt in her heart that he was gone, but through meditation it was as if she were sitting with him again.

Alyson and Lauren were both on the line when Mana picked up the phone for a second time. Sri's body had been found 200 feet from shore. The Honolulu Medical Examiner's office would report that he died of "blunt force and propeller injuries." He was 59.

Her dad had always told her that he was going to die in the ocean. That's where he was most at home. It wasn't much comfort in the moment, but she knew he was at peace.

## **A LIFETIME OF MEMORIES**

Some of Mana's favorite moments with her dad were in the water.

When she was young, he would wake her up early on school days so they could drive down to Ala Moana Bowls in Honolulu and spend the morning riding the breakers. He was one of a revered breed of Hawaiian watermen and he taught her everything she knew about surfing, and about life.

A Hawaii native, Sri was a jokester who never took things too seriously and knew how to relish every moment. He wasn't bound by many possessions. When he wasn't in the ocean, he embraced his work as a florist. He had only recently made the decision to close his flower shop, hoping to start a new business selling plumeria cuttings, a fragrant flower known in Hawaii as a symbol of positivity and one that Mana often wears in her hair.

Sri always told Mana to choose what she loved and that's how she discovered her natural affinity for soccer. She valued the creativity of the game. By the time she was six, she was playing constantly. Sri had a knack for playfully prodding her in a way that brought out her passion for the sport.

Mana still remembers excitedly running up to her dad after one practice at the age of seven to tell him that she had juggled the ball 13 times. "That's not very many," he joked. "I bet you can't get to 25." Sri spent the next three hours leaning against his car and laughing as his daughter tried to get 25 touches before the ball hit the ground. When she finally reached her goal, she gave her dad a satisfied smirk.

"I try not to take the game too seriously because that's not the player I am," Mana says. "I'm creative and I want to enjoy it and really have it be a full and true expression of myself. That's how he was. That's how he surfed. That's how he lived his life."

When Mana signed her first professional contract with the Thorns in 2013, Sri hung a photo of her in her uniform on the wall of his flower shop. He would proudly tell people about his daughter, the soccer player, when they came into the store.

The Thorns made it all the way to the NWSL Championship that first season with Mana playing an important role in the attack. Sri scraped together enough money to secretly buy a plane ticket to Rochester, New York to watch his daughter compete in the championship game. He surprised Mana at her hotel the night before the match, bringing her favorite Hawaiian dish and a lei to drape around her neck. He called it the highlight of his life.

### **A CELEBRATION OF LIFE**

They gathered at Ala Moana Bowls to celebrate Sri's life on Jan. 23, 2016. Nearly 600 people showed up.

On surf boards, kayaks, boats and canoes, they paddled out and formed a circle in the ocean. Mana paddled out on one of her dad's favorite surfboards, the water spraying her face as she swam. They chanted traditional Hawaiian songs and told stories. There were tears, but also laughter. A fitting celebration for a waterman. Before they dispersed, they recited a Hawaiian prayer and sprinkled a third of Sri's ashes into the deep blue Pacific Ocean. Over time, they would scatter the rest of his ashes at his two other favorite surf spots, Rabbit Island and Day Star. But on that day, they lingered on the water and surfed until sunset, as Sri would have wanted.

In the weeks after her dad's death, Mana was floored by the support she received from the Portland community. Dozens of friends, teammates and members of the Rose City Riveters wrote her letters. Her friend, Evelyn Shoop, helped collect them in box to send to Mana. Two years later, she still has a stack of thank-you cards that she has yet to deliver to all the fans that reached out. There are so many, and she doesn't know where to address them.

It was easy to feel the support around her and she knew she could text her friends and family when she was overcome with emotion. But there were many moments in the months after her dad's death when Mana needed an extra measure of help.

That's how she found herself making the two-hour drive to Eugene each week to see Melissa Todd, Ph.D., a licensed psychologist with a specialty in sport psychology. Todd had previously been a professional runner and could understand the unique challenges of overcoming personal tragedy while relentlessly pursuing a professional career.

And that's why she listened when Todd told her several months into their work together that she believed Mana was battling with more than just grief.

She was also showing symptoms of bipolar disorder.

## **CONFRONTING MENTAL ILLNESS**

Over three months, Todd carefully observed Mana's behavior during their sessions, noting some marked shifts in her mood.

While Mana's energy level seemed normal on certain days, she would be so down on other days that she appeared physically deflated and it was hard for her to even carry on a conversation. And after consistently attending her appointments, Mana's behavior suddenly changed. She abruptly canceled an appointment and acted ambivalent about attending the next session. When she finally returned, something was different. It was clear to Todd that Mana was experiencing what is known as a highly elevated mood state. She admitted to hardly sleeping, but had an overabundance of frantic energy. Her thoughts were so scattered and she spoke so quickly that it was hard to follow what she was trying to say.

Mana's initial reaction to the diagnosis was denial. Mental health has traditionally been a taboo subject for elite athletes who do not wish to convey fragility, although that is starting to change. NBA stars DeMar DeRozan and Kevin Love recently opened up about their struggles with depression and anxiety. Still, Mana was well-aware of the particular stigma around bipolar disorder, which is associated with extreme mood swings and manic episodes.

But Mana's sister, Lauren, had been diagnosed with the same illness. And as she did more research, she began to see how the diagnosis fit. Moments in her life that she never understood began to come into sharper focus.

"There were a lot of things that you could easily attribute to experiencing something tragic, like losing a parent," Mana says. "But there were also other things throughout my life that made a lot more sense once I was diagnosed."

During college at Santa Clara University, Mana would experience weeks where she struggled to simply get out of bed and go to class. Everything around her seemed oddly dull and she could not summon any energy. Her grades suffered. At the same time, she had trouble committing to nights out with friends because she wasn't sure if she would be in the right emotional state to mingle when the time came. Maybe she was lazy, or had social anxiety?

But those words didn't seem to fit with her identity as an elite athlete and her bubbly and social personality.

It was early 2017 when Mana began to fully accept the bipolar diagnosis and agreed to start taking a daily mood stabilizer. The difference was palpable. The feelings of depression that had periodically weighed her down and made it difficult for her to even get out of bed started to subside. She no longer had to exert as much energy pushing herself to show up for practices or events. She could just concentrate on being present in the moment.

Six months after she started taking medication, Mana announced her illness to the world [in a blog post](#). Her story is composed of many layers, but this was an important piece of it. To be true to herself - and to fight back in a small way against the stigma around bipolar disorder - she had to share her experience.

"I understand that our existence is transient," she wrote. "I refuse to spend my short life hiding something that is very much a part of who I am."

## MOVING FORWARD

The pain never completely goes away.

Mana still thinks about her dad constantly. She still knows how out of control her emotions can become if she doesn't properly manage her illness. Sometimes, the weight of everything is all too much, as it was that night in Sweden when she became so hysterical thinking about the terrible reality of her loss that she called her psychologist and stayed on the phone for an hour sobbing.

But she is also moving forward, step by step.

Even in the toughest moments, she never considered quitting soccer. It's an outlet for her, much as life in the water was to her dad. He wouldn't have ever wanted her to walk away from something that was a creative expression of what made her feel most alive.

Last year, she began to reflect on her soccer career and consider what she truly wanted to get out of the sport. She had [fallen in love with Portland](#) during her more than four years with the Thorns, but her playing time had declined as more top international players joined the club. She knew she needed to leave her adopted home if she hoped to continue to take her game to the next level. After her short stint in Sweden last year, Mana [signed a contract](#) with the Houston Dash in March. She has started in both of the club's matches this year.

"I spend a lot of time thinking about my dad and his death and reminding myself that that's what we know about being human," Mana says. "We're going to die and we have this time to make of it what we want to make of it. That was always his perspective. He reminded me to play until I didn't want to play anymore, that this is something that I do because I love it."

## KEEP ON RIDING

On the morning of his death, Sri Shim woke up before dawn and drove up to the North Shore of Oahu to spend the morning surfing at Day Star, one of his favorite spots. He was on his surfboard as the red and orange dawn gave way to a vivid blue Hawaiian day.

Mana and her two sisters drove out to that same spot last summer to sprinkle the remainder of their dad's ashes into the ocean. Her sisters waited on the beach as Mana paddled out to the breakers as she had done so many times before with her dad, the two of them together in the waters of Hawaii one last time.

She felt in perfect equilibrium with the spirit of her dad and the boundless ocean as she rode past the waves. She has kept on riding.

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