

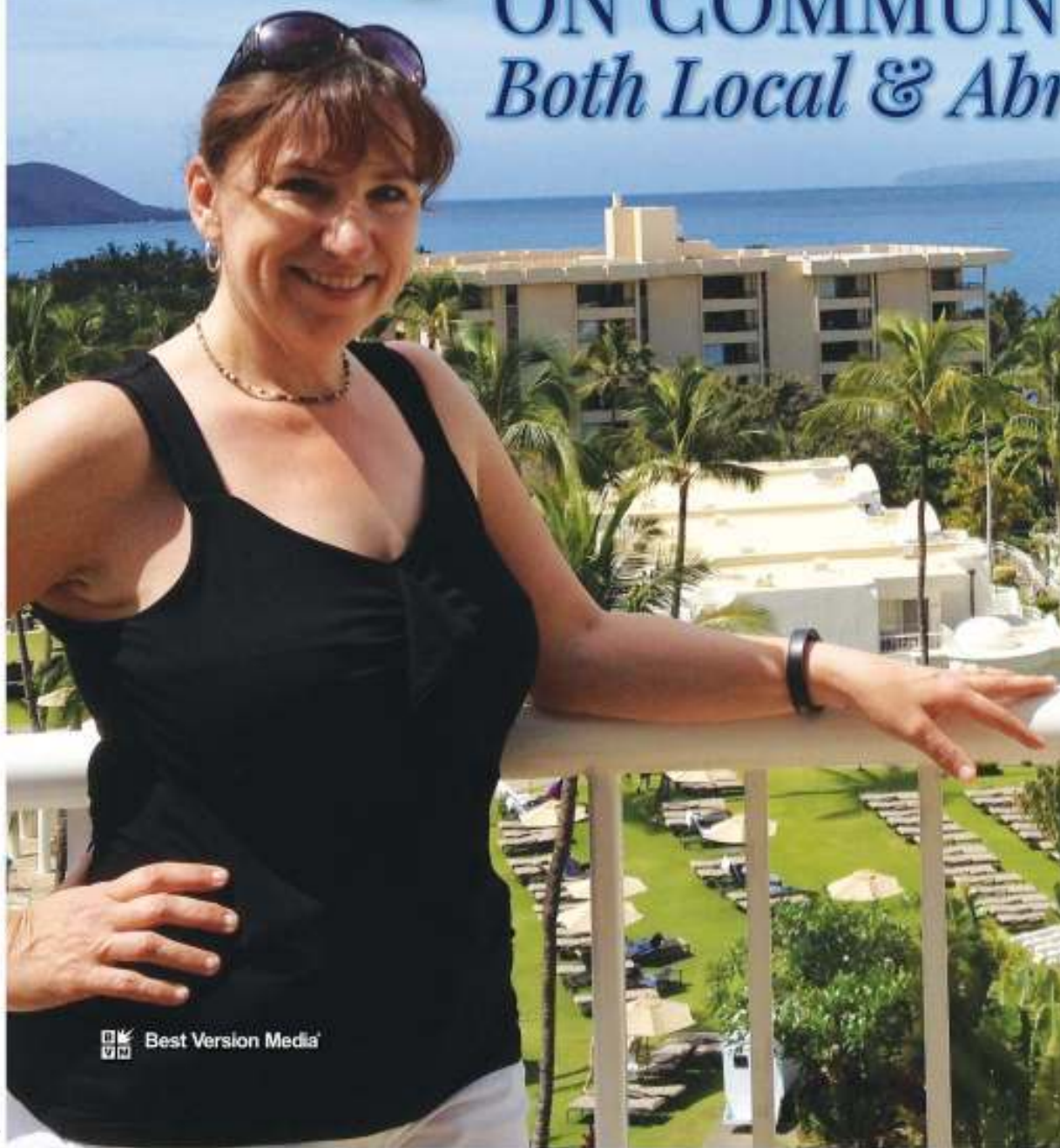
SILVER CREEK

APRIL 2019

Spotlight

Suzette Mack

ON COMMUNITY,
Both Local & Abroad





SUZETTE MACK

On Community - Both Local and Abroad

By Eme Akpabio

Suzette Mack is a thirty-year resident of Evergreen, a mother of two Silver Oak/Chaboya alums, & a local businessperson.

Originally from the Midwest, Suzette went on to become a grad student in chemistry on the east coast, and had expected to make her life in New York. Then her boyfriend, now husband, got a job offer in Silicon Valley.

They moved out to San Jose together and both got jobs in the semiconductor industry. Ten years later, they started a family. In the midst of managing the demands of a stressful

job and the needs of a young family, working for herself started to look like an attractive option. Later, when Suzette's company went through a round of layoffs, she decided to jump off the corporate track and become an entrepreneur.



Initially, the travel agency was a side business that allowed Suzette more time to be involved with her children and volunteer activities at their school. Like her children, the agency has grown and flourished over the years. In 2018, she celebrated her 20th year of business. To mark that milestone, Suzette donated a percentage of her profits for the year to the nonprofit organization Tourism Cares (www.tourismcares.org). The mission of Tourism Cares is "to advance the travel industry's positive social and environmental impact."

WHAT LED YOU TO DONATE TO TOURISM CARES?

Most travel advisors are independent contractors; as a big thing for me was finding a mentor and becoming affiliated with a supportive host agency, Brownell Travel. I

learned about Tourism Cares through my host agency. I like how they work with agencies and travel suppliers to help tourist areas that are in need. When a natural disaster happens, the news cycle moves on relatively quickly, but those areas are still recovering for a long time after.

A lot of suppliers in those areas also give back to their community. For example, a hotel in Costa Rica gives visitors an opportunity to engage in philanthropic activity, like volunteering at a local school. That is a great option for people who want to do a family vacation but also want to do something meaningful during that time.

WHAT MADE YOU DECIDE ON A TRAVEL BUSINESS?

The seed for starting a travel business was planted on my first trip to Alaska over 20 years ago. My husband and I had sabbaticals from our engineering jobs in Silicon Valley, and we spent more than a month traveling throughout the state. Planning every detail of that trip was one of the most fun and fulfilling projects I ever had, and I knew I wanted to pursue a career in the travel industry, specializing in adventure travel.

WHAT WAS IT LIKE STARTING A TRAVEL AGENCY? AND WHAT IS IT LIKE TO RUN A TRAVEL AGENCY NOW, WHEN THERE ARE SO MANY TRAVEL SITES?

At the time I started, things were already starting to change, airlines were no longer paying commission, and I was able to find a niche. Starting out I wasn't focused on marketing, I mostly reached out to family and friends. Business grew through word of mouth.



It's more common now for agencies to set up family trips to Africa or Asia but at the time there was a gap in the industry. Back then, many travel agencies and suppliers did not think families had any interest in traveling beyond going to a beach resort.

I sometimes run into people who believe that you can't travel until your kids are older but it's actually easier to travel with babies. You just have to adjust your expectations. And then, when the kids are older, you can go back and see things in a different way.

I know a lot of people whose passion is do-it-yourself travel, doing their own research online, but some people don't have time for that. I create custom, bespoke experiences for people who don't necessarily have time to, for example, plan their own two- or four-week tour to China. I focus on the luxury market and I'm able to compete price-wise because of the relationships I've established with colleagues and in-country contacts all over the world. My clients receive exclusive



amenities such as free breakfast, upgrades, hotel credits, and even free nights, which makes booking through me a better value than they can get booking themselves.

YOU RUN YOUR BUSINESS FROM HOME, WHAT HAS THAT EXPERIENCE BEEN LIKE FOR YOU?

One thing I've learned is that there are a lot of skilled people working from home. I just found another local person who works from home to re-design my website (www.suzetteemacktravel.com). Sites like Next Door make it easy for people to look around and try to hire locally. I'm also a member of the Evergreen Business Association (www.ebagroup.org), which is another great way to find out about local businesses.

Though I wasn't focused on marketing in the beginning, I've also learned that social media is an invaluable marketing tool for people who work from home.

DO YOU HAVE A SPECIAL MESSAGE FOR YOUR NEIGHBORS?

For people who have never used a travel advisor before, if anyone's afraid to, just pick up the phone or send an email. Talk to them and see if they're a good fit for your needs. It's the same as if you're looking for a financial advisor or interior decorator. Ideally, it's a long-term relationship. Once you get to know each other, and trust each other, it makes travel planning so much faster going forward.

