



# She Surfs

## Kiyomi Sheppard

Words by Sasha Leitner  
Photos by: Buddy Sheppard | pamalusurf.com

### Living in a Man's World

Kiyomi Iwamoto Sheppard is what I would call a pillar of strength. She rushes huge Sunset and Waimea with the boys in the thumping winter months. But that is not all that this multidimensional trailblazer of a woman is.

Kiyomi is a small, unassuming Japanese woman, but by trade she is a heavy machine operator. She operates backhoes, pours concrete, and can even do all kinds of finishing work. "These are trades in Japan usually held by men," Kiyomi laughs and tells me.

In a society where the lines between men and women's places are strongly defined, Kiyomi, (to travel and surf) did the unthinkable, and made herself a place in a man's world. A true inspiration to any woman fighting for a place in a man's world in the water and in the work place, Kiyomi is a trailblazer in life and in the water. Considering Kiyomi is now a woman in her 40's, only validates her fierce strength in defying the social barriers in her country.

### Journey to Surf

It was not commonplace to see women surfing in Japan when Kiyomi first learned. "I was from the city, but I always dreamed about being a surfer. Thirty years ago when I taught myself to surf, there were not many women who surfed, or many Japanese men for that fact. You would see guys walking around on the beach with surfboards, but very few of them actually surfed. It was all for the look."

Kiyomi was a teenager when she taught herself to surf the cold waters of Japan. The travel bug got ahold of Kiyomi and took her to Australia. She spent the next year and a half of her surfing journey in the famed Aussie area of surfer's paradise.

"In Australia, old and young people surf. It is a way of life there, and I wanted to be just like them. I really got a taste for the surfer lifestyle in Australia."

Kiyomi's time in Australia was short lived. A huge earthquake in Japan took her back to her home country. Her skills in the construction field offered her an opportunity to return home and make money to save for more surf trips.

"No women were in my field in Japan. I had to work so hard to earn the respect of my coworkers. At first, they were not kind to me. They would tell me to go get a woman's job, and leave this to the men. It was so hard, but I love dirty, hard jobs. It made me strong. There were no high heels or fancy clothes like all the rest of the Japanese women in the work place."

The tough work environment prepared Kiyomi mentally and physically to become the fierce big wave surfer she is today.

"After being in Australia, I had the surf bug bad. When I was back home working construction in Japan, all I would think about would be surfing and where I would travel next to surf." Peru, Indo, and California were the surf spots she used as training.

Kiyomi's goal was to surf the famed North Shore of Oahu. "Everywhere I surfed was, in my mind, a stepping stone to getting ready to go to Hawaii."

When Kiyomi first came to the North Shore, she had enough money saved up for a food budget, and that was it. Hawaii is expensive, and she could not afford a place to stay, so she slept in her truck, and chased waves. "I lived the surfer's life; I was checking spots and surfing all day! It was amazing. I felt so fortunate to be in the ocean in Hawaii, living the life I used to dream about."

Kiyomi met her husband 12 years ago on the North Shore and they married in 2003. Before she met him and with nowhere to stay on the North Shore, Kiyomi had all her bags and boards with her as she wandered around looking for accommodations in the country.

"I only had saved \$800 American dollars for a 3 month trip, so I was on a tight budget. I walked by a group of North Shore guys, and he (my soon to be husband) asked me, 'Where are you going with all those bags, Japanese girl?' I told him my situation, and he was shocked I had so little money. He offered me a studio space for \$400 less than he should have. I helped him with construction projects to make money and make up for the little rent he was charging me. We wound up dating for 3 years before we finally got married."

Kiyomi and her husband now have a beautiful home at Sunset Beach that they built together. Kiyomi did the foundation and the finish work, and her husband did the rest. They live on the top floors of this beautiful home with their son.

"I used to struggle to find a place to stay in the North Shore to surf when I did not live here, so I wanted to create an affordable place for surfers to stay. We rent our rooms out for \$44 a night, so surfers can afford it. We have a communal kitchen, outdoor showers, an organic garden, bikes for the bike path, and we are walking distance to Sunset Beach."

The rooms are beautiful, and the walls are covered in Kiyomi's original paintings. The images of the huge waves that Kiyomi paints can be found all over the house to bring an intimate feeling to the surf house. They are always busy, so put your reservations in early! (sunsetnaluhousehawaii.com)

### Love of Surf

Surfing North Shore has its challenges for any surfer. Broken boards, stitches, 14 staples, and tons of bruises have all been a part of Kiyomi's learning experience. The country waves are heavier than most places in the world, so training your mind and body is very important. You can find Kiyomi out with her husband, who is her coach and surf buddy.

"The nose of my board stuck in my head one time, and the fin of my board sliced my thigh another year. I took up paddling outriggers during the summers when the North Shore is flat to keep my body and mind strong for the big waves of the winter."

Kiyomi has paddled the one man Molokai Challenge and finished 2nd in 2007, and 3rd in 2010. "Paddling is no fun, but it keeps my arms in shape and my mind focused for when the waves come back."

To truly be a waterwoman takes endurance, strength, determination, and the love of surf. Kiyomi is one of these elite waterwomen who displays and lives the life. In her personal life, she has been an inspiration to all young women by fighting for equality in the workplace in her home country. As a surfer, who rushes the big North Shore, she has embedded herself amongst a hui of elite female athletes.

She has this waterwoman's humbled admiration. ♦

