

| MEET YOUR NEIGHBOR

CRACKING THE CODE

This month, after years of effort and many thousands of dollars of investment, San Luis Obispo native KRISTEN HAZARD officially launches her highly anticipated software she calls Wildnote. Here is her story...

PHOTOGRAPHY BY VANESSA PLAKIAS





kay, Kristen, we like to take it from the top. Tell us where you are from originally. I'm from here. Born in San Luis Obispo, Sierra Vista Hospital. Raised mostly here, but also Atascadero, Grover, Garden Farms, which is in Santa Margarita, that teeny little part of Santa Margarita. My mom was a bit of a gypsy. At some point we were also in Fresno, and we were in Shaver Lake, and then Hawaii, but mostly I grew up here. I went to Allan Hancock because I got a volleyball scholarship

there and really wanted to play Division 1 volleyball, but I injured myself and that went away; so I went to Cal Poly where I majored in mechanical engineering. And then I drove across the country to get out of California because I thought it was too expensive. I did a three-month road trip and then hightailed it right back to California. [laughter] I had run out of money, so I went to the Bay Area to find work.

Where did you land? I got kind of wrapped up in some startup that is referred to as "vaporware." It's basically fraudulent, and I got myself caught up in this company. It was during the first dot com boom and these people basically made a bunch of stuff up about their business. And nobody knew about it, and they would get investors but nothing was really happening. It was pretty much a scam. So I kind of got wrapped up in the company, not knowing what was going on. This was in the

late 90's and I found myself in the middle of this thing. It was all very weird and so I was disillusioned and decided to go to law school. I went to this really tiny, very interesting law school called New College in San Francisco.

Let's talk about that. It was really cool. I was friends with a Columbian guerilla fighter, and there were all of these interesting international gays there, and also a few shysters, because it wasn't a very hard law school to get into. It was really interesting and I had been trained as an engineer, so law school was really easy for me because it's a very similar thinking pattern. Most people come into it from liberal arts and they're not trained to think that way, and they struggled. So I did that, and then I thought I was going to be a public defender in San Francisco, but I had to wait for my bar exam results, so I took a job with a criminal defense attorney in the meantime. But he only hired me part-time, so I found another job at

a startup in the Valley. It was 20 hours a week at the law firm, and 20 hours at the startup. The differences between the two were really crazy. So, at the law firm, what was this lefty law firm, I sort of expected this kind of familial thing to happen, like we would all be friendly with each other. It wasn't like that at all. I was like their factory motion writer. They had no interest in me as a person. And the reason they hired me part-time was that they hired another person part-time, and we were competing for the job. I didn't know that at the time. I just thought they didn't have money to pay for a full-time person.

Alright, what came next? So, I'm in that situation, and it just felt really weird. And I'm also at the startup playing ping pong, getting free food, a brand new computer with the cubicle. Everyone's talking to me. It's very social. You know what I mean? It was really different, and so I was like, "I love programming!" I realized how much I liked it and thought that I should have studied it instead of going to law school and taking on \$50,000 in debt. I said to myself, "I can't be so irresponsible though." I said that I would give myself a year, "I'm just going to have fun for a year and then I'm going to go back to lawyering and be a serious person." It was five years later that I received a letter in the mail from the State Bar Association that said, "If you don't come pick this thing up, it's going to expire, and you're going to lose the fact that you passed the bar, and you're never going to receive your license." That's how quick the time went. And I never thought about law one time.

It was Silicon Valley all the way... Uh, not really. I had been in the Bay Area and I kind of felt a little bit like a trapped animal. There's just too many people for me; too much pollution. I was living in the city, and the whole thing was really just a little hard for me. I love it down here so much. I love this little life. But, I also love the startup life. I had sort of gotten a taste of it, but I was able to merge the two in 2001 when I moved back. I came down here and the company I was with at the time let me work remotely. So I was managing a team in India, a development team in Bangalore, and a team in L.A., and a team in Sacramento. It was really intense working across time zones, and I spent a lot of days on the phone. It was actually very taxing and kind of a sucky job, but I did it for about five years. I was also programming, but mostly I was managing teams of programmers. I love programming, it's actually my favorite thing to do. But my personality and my bossy nature always seem to land me in management. I'm an okay coder. I'm not the best. I know really good coders. I'm not one of them, but I'm getting better every day.

Tell us about your first programming experience. Well, the very first time was at Cal Poly. I took a robotics class. So you had to write the code to make the machine function; it was really almost like a manufacturing machine, but that is a robot in a sense. So I had to write the code to make it move around. And, then I got a job for a guy running a T-shirt business and I wrote a FileMaker Pro app for him to track all his stuff, which is just the teeniest bit of coding. After that, I worked for a manufacturing facility and wrote a bunch of macros in their Excel documents to track all their performance and stuff. So I would just kind of find my way into doing little baby bits of coding. But it wasn't until after law school, when I first got hired to do real coding. After that, I just kept coding, and learning, and managing, and coding.

Had you ever gone out on your own? Yes, I actually built an app. I thought, "Oh, I'm going to build this. I'm going to get rich!" The joke, as it turns out, is "if you build it, they won't come." [laughter] No, I did not know that joke. So I built this thing. I put it online and waited for my riches to come in. But nobody showed up. Turns out that there's this whole other part of building a product. But now I had something for my portfolio, an actual product, and I taught myself how to build it on my own. Then I ended up going to work for another company in the Bay called dot429 to gain more experience in a programming language called Ruby on Rails and a steady paycheck. That's another thing—I'm >>

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openly gay. I'm out, you know. That was the company that I went to work for, for six months or so. They're like a gay version of LinkedIn, an online community of gay professionals.

Okay, what happened next? I did one more stint with a company in Ventura as their CTO [Chief Technology Officer] then I started SunToucher Software here in town, which is basically a consultancy where I build apps for my clients. A little while later, my girlfriend at the time, Brooke, started an environmental consulting group in San Luis called

Terra Verde and I did her technology stuff. As I was helping her get the business off the ground I was learning about this niche, and through that relationship I ended up building PG&E's environmental reporting app for them for their Carrizo-Midway solar farm project. I built the software that allowed them to stay within environmental compliance and regulations during construction so they could track and report everything quickly and efficiently and accurately.

When did the light bulb click on? Somewhere along the line Brooke started telling me that what I created is something that people in her industry needed. There wasn't anything like it out there. But, what I had done was for PG&E and was owned by them; they were my client and it was their intellectual property. I could not open it up to anybody else. So then I thought, I'm going to build it for everybody, but I'll start from a fresh code base. And it has basically become an open field data collection application for environmental compliance. So what I think is interesting about this part of the story is that I bootstrapped the company. I haven't taken any venture capital money. I first started down this path five years ago and probably three years ago I began building the program, which is now called Wildnote.

Can you give us a quick elevator pitch for your software? Sure, okay, so if you're a biologist, botanist, archeologist, paleontologist, any kind of an -ologist who goes into the field, it allows you to collect your data on your phone or tablet, sync it to the cloud, and be done, right? Versus, really, seriously, they're still using pen and paper. So, for example, if the county sends out a biologist to a location somewhere he or she can say, "Okay there's a bunch of oaks over here. There's maybe a red-legged frog habitat over there. A particular type of raptor in that tree. And some fairy shrimp over there." Of course, fairy shrimp are rare but you get my gist of it, right? Now you can do it all from your phone or iPad in the field, on site; put some drop pins in the various map locations, add photos, add notes and sync it all to the cloud. One click, you have a report, and you're done.

How did the initial roll out go? We did a test with Terra Verde. And it failed. I quickly realized that it was not going to work the way we did it. So we had to go back and rethink how we were building it, re-architect it, rebuild it. Then I started going to industry conferences and showed people the early versions of the product

to ask them what they thought. Probably 90% of the feedback was, "Does it work offline?" Of course it didn't, so I had to go back to the drawing board again. I was super bummed. If I had found that out earlier it would have saved probably six months and who knows how many thousands of dollars. But, at the end of the day I'm so excited to build a product company right here in San Luis Obispo and I think we're going to do good. It's been—I can't even believe how much work it's been—it's so much more work than I could have ever imagined and we're in the thick >>



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of it right now. And, the investment, the amount of money is way more than I thought it would be.

Let's talk about money for a minute. Your company is a member of 1% for the Planet. Tell us about that. Okay, so we give 1% of our revenues to the local land conservancy in San Luis Obispo. We're really into that, and it's just 1%. I think a lot of us live here because of the open space, and air quality. I really wish all of our businesses would be giving back because it would make a huge impact. And that's what I like about the land conservancy. They're doing two things: One is that they're acquiring open space and holding it in perpetuity as open space. Some of it is available to the public, some is not. And, two, they're also doing conservation easements with local ranchers and farmers. And that's a win-win because the ranchers and farmers may not be able to afford those properties anymore because of property taxes. There's also the concept of wildlife corridors where you want to keep enough connected open space for wild animals to be able to do their thing. Take the Pismo Preserve, for example. How cool is that? That was an amazing thing that they pulled off. So, I'm super into all that. And I feel like that's kind of my way to contribute back to, a little teeny bit back to, how much I love this county. That, and employment. I mean, I couldn't believe how happy I was the first time I wrote a check to somebody, you know, for their wages. I was like, "Oh, this feels pretty good."

Let's talk about that, because there aren't a whole lot of women signing paychecks—or earning paychecks for that matter—in the tech world. Yes, that's right. The numbers are just astounding. I think it is something like women make up only around 10% of the technology sector. I've gotten involved with a group in town called CodeSLO that basically offers free training in Javascript, which is just awesome because there is a talent gap in San Luis. There are more companies that need talent and not enough coding talent locally. And, the more tech companies we can have

in San Luis, and throughout the county, the better we'll do, I think. I lead a little subgroup there that is just for women. It just kind of organically happened. And the reason we don't let men join is because some women, still to this day, when they get around men they just clam up. It's just this natural thing that we were taught, some of us were taught, and so we try to keep it an environment where women will be truly themselves and ask questions. Because when you're learning this stuff, if you feel shy about being dumb, you're not going to get anywhere; you're stuck, basically. So, that's what we did. We just created a space where women who want to break into tech can come and I'll help them. I'm super into it.

How do you see the group making a difference? Because, I think, for example, if you're a single mom, if you have enough, just a little bit, maybe a year's worth of training, you can make a great living and provide for your family; if not with a local company then with another one out of the area working here remotely. I just think there's a way to funnel people into these information technology jobs. And, you don't have to be programmer. You can get into product or project management, or user support. There are all these different things that, if you have a little bit of a technical brain, you can get into. When you start to think about all the jobs that are going to be vulnerable to computers and robotics in the future, following an information technology career is a pretty safe bet for people. So, we get together and we just try to help women break into tech.

What is the number one advice you give to women in the program? Build something. And then build something else. And then, as you build, you'll see, "Am I really into this or not?" Right? And, "Is this fun?" Because you're going to just hit a bunch of hurdles. But, "Is it fun to figure those out?" And then you'll start meeting people to help you and then you get connected, basically. So, that's my advice—just start building. Don't talk about it. Just pick something you like and do it. >>

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One last thing before we let you go. As we've been talking, we couldn't help but notice the tattoo on your forearm. Is there a story behind it?

Yeah. Okay, so this is a raven. And, it's like a totem pole style design. So, I did a silent retreat and I really was struck by how active my mind was. No one is talking. I was around all these people, we were all there together, and we would all eat together, but no one was talking. And I would notice that I would see a stranger in front of me, just like I see you now. And I'd have this whole story about you worked out in my head, all of these preconceived notions. But I'm not getting

any feedback from you because there is no talking, only total silence. Then I began to realize, "Oh, my God, I think that when I'm getting feedback from people I'm using it to perpetuate the story I've already made up about them." It was such a profound revelation for me to realize that my mind was playing tricks on me—our minds play tricks on all of us—and to not always believe what it was saying. I know that probably sounds a little weird, but since the raven is known as a trickster, it is my constant reminder to try to stay away from that as much as possible—and to be open. **SLO LIFE**