

PROFILE

DUSTIN SHINDO:

Catch A Rising *Hoku* *By Aaron Ragan-Fore*

When Dustin Shindo (BA 1999) returned to Hilo, Hawaii, from graduate school on the East Coast, he planned to go straight into the family soft drink bottling and distribution business. “Within two months, my family sold the company,” grins the charismatic entrepreneur.

Shindo was unsure of his next move, but the downtime didn’t last long. Recalling his penchant for extracurricular beer brewing while a UW Business School undergraduate, Shindo took stock of his resources and, within a couple of days, formulated a plan for his first business venture.

Born of his family’s experience and contacts in the bottling industry, that idea became Mehana Brewing Company. A decade later, Shindo’s father Calvin is still general manager and brewmaster at the Hilo-based micro-brewery.

Shindo left Mehana after a few years. When a tourism software business stalled, he relied again on friends and family for a third undertaking, his most ambitious yet. In 2001, at age 27, Shindo co-founded Hoku Scientific, manufacturer of membranes and mem-

brane electrode assemblies used in energy-producing hydrogen fuel cells for homes and automobiles. The 30-person enterprise is the only domestic fuel cell company to go public since the tech bubble burst.

Hoku, which means “star” in Hawaiian and “north” in Japanese, is a fitting name for a company devoted to sustainable, clean energy (though Shindo admits that a four-letter moniker also fits on a stock ticker without abbreviation). While Shindo acknowledges that currently “no one knows someone who owns a fuel cell,” he sees great promise in the nascent technology.

“I think of fuel cells like the original cell phones, when they were big bricks,” he muses. “Fundamentally, the technology makes sense.”

Now partnered with deep-pocketed clients as diverse as Sanyo, Nissan, and the US Navy, Shindo is in good company with his dreaming. Like his earlier ventures, Hoku is based in Hawaii, and the company is making waves in the tech sector of a state where most incoming dollars originate from tourism.

Shindo’s younger brother Ryan is Hoku’s director of operations, and UW accounting grad Darryl Nakamoto (BA 1996) is the company’s CFO, but Hoku’s domestic atmosphere doesn’t fade outside the hiring office. Familial obligation marks the entire company, where six-day work weeks are the norm and CEO Shindo sometimes cleans the bathrooms himself.

“We run the company and manage the finances much like a family business would,” remarks the young executive. “That culture is pervasive. Everyone works their hearts out, like a family. We’re building something together.” □