

Stacey Rea, author of the *Let's Play Modern American Mah Jongg!* series, interviews Sharona Saltzman about *Tiles That Unite* for her latest blog.

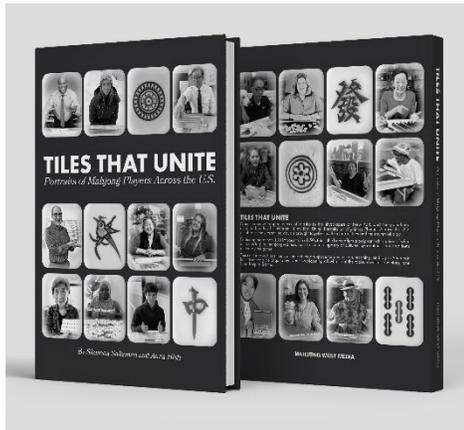


Portraits of a Shared Passion: A Conversation with Sharona Saltzman

Any Mah Jongg player knows that the game is about so much more than just "Crack, Bam, Dot." It's about the laughter shared over a difficult Charleston, the resilience found in a losing streak, and the lifelong friendships forged one tile at a time.

Today, I am thrilled to share an exclusive interview with Sharona Saltzman, the curator behind the beautiful new book, *Tiles That Unite: Portraits of Mahjong Players Across the U.S.* This ambitious project features voices from all 50 states, documenting how this beloved game serves as a bridge across cultures and generations.

Sharona joined me to discuss how her simple desire to honor the players evolved into a nationwide movement. Below, she shares the inspiration behind the book and why documenting these personal stories is so vital to preserving the spirit of the game.



Stacey: Thank you so much for agreeing to be interviewed for my blog, Sharona. Before we get into the book you published, “*Tiles That Unite: Portraits of Mahjong Players Across the U.S.*,” as background information for my readers, would you please tell us a bit about your history as it pertains to the game of Mah Jongg? For example, in the Introduction to your book, you mention that the timing was right when an opportunity arose for you to learn the game and that your teacher, Judi was instrumental in fostering your love of the game. Will you talk a little bit more about this?

Sharona: Mahjong entered my life at a moment of transition. With my daughter heading off to college, I suddenly had space to explore something entirely new. When a friend invited me to learn the game, I said yes without realizing it would open the door to an entirely new world. My teacher, Judi, played a pivotal role in that beginning. She didn't just teach the mechanics of the game, she created an environment that was welcoming, spirited, and deeply social. Very quickly I understood that mahjong is never just about the tiles. It is about the people around the table.

As I became more immersed, my curiosity grew beyond my own weekly game. I sought out different styles and learned Chinese and Taiwanese mahjong, which gave me a deeper appreciation for the game's cultural roots and global reach. What struck me everywhere I went was how mahjong naturally gathers a remarkable mix of people. Different ages, backgrounds, professions, and life stories all meeting in the same space, connected by play.

I found myself increasingly drawn to the human side of the game. The friendships, the rituals, the inherited sets, the laughter, the resilience. Some players were preserving family traditions, others were discovering mahjong for the first time and building entirely new communities. There is something quietly powerful about a table where everyone belongs. That realization is what ultimately inspired *Tiles That Unite*. Long before it became a book, it was a desire to honor the breadth of people who keep this game vibrant and evolving.

Mahjong continues to reinvent itself through the players who embrace it, and I feel incredibly fortunate that saying yes to one invitation allowed me to witness that world firsthand.

Stacey: *Thank you for sharing a bit about your mahjonn origin story and the inspiration for your book. You have turned your deep appreciation of how Mah Jongg enriches the lives of so many people into this wonderful hard-cover book that features profiles of a wide variety of Mahjonn players. Will you tell us more about how the book came to be?*

Sharona: Mahjong has long been part of my life, but what struck me most was how deeply personal the game is for so many people. Everywhere I went, I heard stories of friendship, family traditions, resilience, and connection, and I realized they deserved to be documented and shared. The idea for *Tiles That Unite* grew from a desire to capture these experiences and honor the players as much as the game itself. What began as a simple concept evolved into a nationwide project featuring voices from all 50 states, each offering a unique perspective on how mahjong shapes their lives.

Stacey: *Correct me if I am wrong, but I seem to remember that when you first contacted me about participating in a project, it was initially going to be a film documentary, is that right? If so, can you talk about how it evolved into a book instead, or are you still planning on making a documentary too?*

Sharona: You're remembering correctly. The project was originally envisioned as a documentary, but given the time, travel, and production involved, the book felt like the most immediate and meaningful way to bring these stories together. A documentary is still a possibility for the future. For now, I'm thrilled these voices are being shared in such a lasting format.

Stacey: *I'm also curious about how you decided which people to include in your book. How did you find them, and were any people asked but declined to participate? I checked and you have all 50 states represented, and you have 159 portraits in total. Of that total, nearly 20% of them were from New York and over 15% were from California. Is there a particular reason you have so many from those 2 states?*

Sharona: The book features 159 participants, along with two author perspectives. Players were found through community outreach, clubs, tournaments, personal networks, and referrals. A small number declined for personal (not wanting their photo or name in the book) or health reasons. New York is strongly represented due to my exhibition at the Museum of Chinese in America*, and California reflects where I live. My goal was to include players from all fifty states who share a genuine love of the game, highlighting how widely mahjong is played across the country.

Stacey: *Can you tell me the reason you decided not to mention anything in the book related to each person's relationship to Mah Jongg as it pertains to a business they might be involved in?*

Sharona: The focus of the book is entirely on each player's personal relationship with mahjong. I wanted to capture what drew them to the game, the traditions they follow, and the stories that make it meaningful to them. It's not meant to promote anyone's business, book, or vocation—this is about their genuine connection to the game, their experiences, and the ways mahjong has shaped their lives. Keeping it personal ensures the stories stay authentic, warm, and heartfelt.

Stacey: *Are there some "behind the scenes" tidbits about putting this book together that you'd like to share with my readers? Maybe something unexpected that happened or something especially challenging?*



Sharona: Yes, there were a few challenges putting this book together. One was tracking players across the country when people moved, which meant I sometimes had to find another player to represent that state. Even when the book was supposed to be “final,” people would update me about new versions of mahjong they had learned or send a new photo to reflect changes in their look.

Stacey: *I would love it if you would tell us more about your media company, Mahjong West Media.*

Sharona: Mahjong West Media is focused on celebrating and sharing the stories of mahjong and its community. We have plans for a large event in the future, another book, and some museum exhibitions, but the details are still coming together. I’m excited to continue creating projects that highlight this amazing game and the people who play it. Here is a link to our website: <https://mahjongwestmedia.com/>

Stacey: *What has been the response to your book so far?*

Sharona: The response has been overwhelmingly positive. People are excited to see a book that focuses on the players, who they are, what brought them to the game, and the variety of backgrounds and versions they play across the country. It has been wonderful to share those stories and celebrate the amazing community behind mahjong.

Here are just a few of the many wonderful comments we’ve received:

- “It felt like a school yearbook. We should bring it to tournaments and have friends sign their pages.” — Andrew K.
- “It’s my 15 minutes of fame. Super fun book. I’m honored to be included and loved reading these short and varied little vignettes about our favorite game. The common thread in all the stories is LOVE!” — Cari K.
- “Getting the chance to put into words what mahjong has meant in my family feels incredibly meaningful. This game has always been more than tiles and rules.” — Shanna G.

Stacey: *Do you have plans for publishing a second edition any time in the future?*

Sharona: I’m definitely planning another book in the future, though it may not be a second edition of this one. I’m excited to continue exploring the stories and community around mahjong in new ways.

Stacey: *Where can people who want to purchase the book, find it?*

Sharona: This is the Amazon link: <https://a.co/d/Od9RkK88>

Stacey: *Is there anything else about your book, or Mah Jongg or your experience with the game you’d like to add that I didn’t ask about?*

Sharona: Being part of the mahjong community has been such a joy. The game brings together people of all backgrounds, sparks friendships, and creates moments of laughter, learning, and shared achievement. My book was a chance to capture that energy and show how mahjong shapes lives in so many meaningful ways. I hope it inspires others to experience the fun, the challenge, and the connections that make this game so special.

Stacey: *Thanks again for sharing a bit about your journey with mahjong, how your book came to be and what makes Mah Jongg more than just a game for so many of us, Sharona.*

Sharona: Thank you so much for interviewing me. I really appreciate it. It was a pleasure to share a bit about the book, the players, and the wonderful mahjong community.

* For more about the exhibition at the Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA) that Sharona refers to, go to this link:
<https://mahjongwestmedia.com/media>