Duke's Waikiki Celebrates 20 Years of Aloha

By Dr. Richard Kelley

This past weekend, Duke's Waikiki at Outrigger® Waikiki on the Beach celebrated its 20th anniversary. That's a great milestone and a wonderful business story but there is a meaningful personal story behind the headline that I'd like to share with you.

When the Outrigger Waikiki hotel opened in 1967, it had two restaurants at the beach level. The Blue Dolphin Room served mid-priced meals and drinks to guests by the swimming pool. On the Diamond Head side of that, Perry Boys Smorgy, an all-you-can-eat buffet restaurant, occupied the rest of the oceanfront space. Twenty years later, after the owner of Perry's had passed away, I began looking for a restaurant that could bring more life to that fabulous location.

I contacted a personal friend, Rob Thibaut who, with one of his friends, Sandy Saxten, was operating several successful restaurants in Lahaina, Maui, and the Lake Tahoe area of California. We talked about opening a beachfront restaurant at Outrigger Waikiki on and off for almost two years. Rob agreed that it would be a good idea, but he preferred a similar beachfront location at the Outrigger Reef Hotel. I told him that space there was not available, and for about two years I kept trying to convince him he would do very well at Outrigger Waikiki, before I got him to agree.

Then, we talked about the name of the restaurant. That did not take long, since the Outrigger Waikiki was built on the former location of the Outrigger Canoe Club where Hawai'i's famous Olympic swimming champion and surfer, Duke Kahanamoku, had kept his canoe. After appropriate discussions and agreements with Duke's widow, Nadine, and her family, construction of Duke's Waikiki began. It would occupy the hotel's entire beachfront, covering the space formerly used by both Perry's Smorgy and the Blue Dolphin Room.

When Duke's opened in 1993, Nadine Kahanamoku and other family members were in attendance. So were many of Waikīki's wonderful beachboys. The configuration of the previous restaurants did not include access from the beach and customers had been asked to be "properly attired" with a shirt and shoes or sandals. Rob and Sandy changed that by building stairs down to the beach for easy access and making it known: "No shirt, no shoes, no problem!"

The beachboys came right into Duke's. Young ladies followed and it has been Waikīki's hot spot since the day it opened 20 years ago. The food and service have always been the best on the beach as well.

Sadly, Rob Thibaut developed cancer and died about five years later, but T S Restaurants has prospered under the leadership of Sandy Saxten, Bill Parsons and a wonderful group of managers. They currently operate five restaurants in California and eight in Hawai'i. Five of the restaurants proudly carry the name Duke's.

Duke's Waikiki is celebrating its 20th year by donating a total of $12,000 to local nonprofit organizations through its ongoing Legacy of Aloha program, which supports many community activities...
and perpetuates Hawaiian culture. To date, the program has donated more than $40,000 to area nonprofits that Duke Kahanamoku himself would have supported.

Sandy Saxten relates a wonderful story about his partner Rob Thibaut. In the early days of T S Restaurants, Rob, a great talker and writer, was asked to put together a mission statement for their new business. Rob came back with a three-page narrative, which was promptly rejected.

He compressed the statement to four paragraphs, which was still deemed too long. Rob then asked, “How about six words?” **Have Fun. Make Money. With Aloha!**

That was perfect and perhaps that mission statement is one of the key reasons that Duke’s and T S Restaurants have been so successful over the decades.

Congratulations to Duke’s and the entire team at T S Restaurants. Everyone at Outrigger Enterprises Group is proud to have you as our partners, and we hope that 20 years from now we all will still be **Having Fun. Making Money. With Aloha!**

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**Henry Kapono - a perfect complement for the occasion**