Rain Doesn’t Dampen Our Team’s Can-Do Spirit

By Dr. Richard Kelley

The hospitality industry is always full of surprises, and recent events at several of our Hawai’i properties have once again reminded us that we can never be complacent. This time, the surprises were mostly weather-related, but that wasn’t all.

Travelers from all over the world flock to our Pacific-area properties because the weather is usually so delightful. Particularly at this time of the year, visitors from Canada, the continental U.S., Northern Europe, Japan and North China travel to Hawai’i, Guam, Fiji, Australia, Bali and Thailand to escape winter snows and freezing temperatures. They usually find just what they are looking for, but every once in a while Mother Nature throws a curve ball in the form of a storm, earthquake, volcanic eruption, flood, tsunami, mudslide, etc. The list is long and frightening.

Recently, Mother Nature’s wrath was directed at Hawai’i, and suddenly the focus and mission of our ‘ohana there switched from providing relaxation, pleasure and heartfelt hospitality to one of concern for everyone’s safety. It was all done with excellence, speed and efficiency. Here’s the story.

Beginning in the last few days of February and continuing for almost two weeks, Pacific storms crossed back and forth over the Hawaiian Islands, bringing record rains and high winds. The heaviest downpour was at Hanalei, Kaua’i, with 46 inches (117 cm.) over a seven-day period! That works out to an astonishing six and a half inches a day (over half a foot, or nearly 17 cm.). A waterspout off Windward O’ahu came ashore as a tornado and tore across the town of Kailua, lifting off part of a roof and wreaking other havoc. Hail fell on O’ahu with stones reported as large as three inches (7.6 cm.) in diameter, according to the Associated Press.

During those hectic days everyone in our ‘ohana worked together as a team to ensure our guests’ safety, prevent property damage and clean up. Here are a couple of first-hand reports of what it was like.

At the Outrigger Kiahuna Plantation Resort on Kaua’i, with 7.4 inches (18.8 cm.) of rain in 24 hours, General Manager Chris Gampon reported, “The rain ended up flooding the Maintenance base yard. Note the picture of Jesse Jacinto from our Housekeeping department. As you can tell from his expression, the water was a little deeper than he thought. So much for rubber boots!”

At the Outrigger Waipouli Beach Resort, also on Kaua’i, Assistant General Manager Vicki Valenciano said, “Yesterday was an unbelievably rainy hell! In my 10 years on this island’s Coconut Coast, I have never seen anything like this. The rain was unrelenting. We had flooding or threats of flooding everywhere. For an hour and a half water was gushing about five inches high from a misdirected, clogged gutter into the hallway just outside our offices. Two ground floor units had some minor flooding and our lobby was a mess from rain blowing in from the porte-cochere. But all in all, we survived well. All employees showed up for work, and we all pitched in and helped wherever there was a need. The Association Of Apartment Owners employees, contract landscaping and Outrigger Housekeeping
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Continued from page 1

employees all worked together as a team. We even had the General Manager of the AOAO and our Regional/General Manager working in tandem squeegeeing our lobby. We had very few guest complaints and only a handful of early checkouts and cancellations, and occupancy still remains above 90 percent at both Outrigger Waipouli Beach Resort and Outrigger at Lānīnī.

At Outrigger Reef on the Beach in Waikīkī, General Manager Bill Comstock reported, “Record rainstorms hit hard last week and the Team at the Outrigger Reef struck right back. No one had to instruct anyone what to do. The Team just did it. Engineering donned rain gear and dug drainage ditches to relieve the flooding. Housekeeping sprang into action with wet vacs and mops despite the fact that their own offices and lockers flooded. The Front Desk, already facing a sold-out night, had to reassign most of the house because a number of our rooms were taken out of order by water infiltrating from wind- and rain-lashed patios. Despite all the challenges, the Team never lost focus on our guests’ safety or pleasure. We even expanded our activity offerings when the Bell department came up with a list of great rainy-day things for guests to do. Someone once said, ‘The only safe ship in a storm is leadership.’ Well, that means the Reef is a safe ship indeed!”

General Manager Robert McConnell at the Outrigger Waikiki on the Beach wrote, “Attached is a picture of Ivy Kwok doing a ‘dance’ to stop the rain, which flooded the lower lobby. We cleaned everything up as quickly as possible and increased lobby activities to make the guests feel comfortable. Matt Sproat offered miniaturie surfboard making and ukulele lessons. And we thank our wonderful tenants, who offered a variety of specials to our guests during the storm.”

We have not always been as lucky or prepared in the past. The land on a good part of Waikīkī slopes towards the Outrigger Reef. I can remember several occasions when the storm drains in the streets plugged up and thousands, perhaps millions, of gallons of water suddenly poured into the basement of the Reef, even before parked cars could be removed. The same thing can happen with a flood caused by a tsunami, but with experience and better preparation, we have avoided that in recent years.

This season’s storms appear to have passed, but just to remind us all that we can never rest, three nights ago there was a fire in the kitchen flue of the Ocean House Restaurant at the Outrigger Reef. Guests were evacuated from the hotel's Ocean Tower. Fortunately, the blaze was quickly brought under control. There was only limited property damage and no injuries to staff or guests.

Yes, we have to be constantly vigilant. I am proud of the way our ‘ohana has worked so beautifully together meeting the challenges we’ve experienced in the past few weeks. There were no injuries and minimal property damage. Congratulations and māhālo!!!”