Assets School honors a community asset

By Dr. Richard Kelley

Last Friday evening – just over a week ago – Kitty Lagareta, a long-time friend and colleague, was honored for her service to Assets School at its annual gala, held at the Hawai‘i Convention Center. Assets School provides outstanding education to nearly 350 dyslexic and/or gifted children from kindergarten through grade 12, many of whom would find it extremely difficult to develop their full potential in other schools, public or private.

Kitty has served on the Assets board of directors for quite a few years now – one of a great many Hawai‘i nonprofit organization boards on which she serves with enormous energy, imagination and enthusiasm – so it is hardly surprising that Assets chose to honor her with its Illumination Award.

I’ve known Kitty for some three decades – roughly half my adult life. Today she is the CEO of Communications Pacific, one of Hawai‘i’s finest public relations firms. But when I first met her, she had just started working at “CommPac” as an account executive, just about the lowest rung on the ladder of the PR profession.

Only a short time before that I’d taken a first bite of an “apple” that turned out to be much bigger than I ever thought I’d be chewing – an effort to create a convention center in or near Waikiki. I was looking for public relations assistance, and when I talked to Kitty’s boss he said he could make his brand new employee available to help me get a campaign going.

That was the beginning of a professional relationship – and a great friendship – that is still going strong. Kitty has worked with me on countless projects over the years. My effort to stir up some interest in a convention center put me in front of a great many audiences, and I can tell you that public speaking was something I was hardly equipped to do.

Kitty helped me prepare for more speeches and presentations than I can remember. She was my media training guru too. This was something I desperately needed not only for the convention center, but on many other occasions, such as the acquisition of the Prince Kuhio Hotel when we immediately found ourselves at the center of a picketing storm because we hadn’t agreed to the previous owner’s union contract.

In short, Kitty was one of the best of a wonderful group of mentors I was lucky to have as I scrambled to learn the hospitality business on the job, facing one big challenge after another. I am grateful for her continual readiness to help. She has made a tremendous difference in my life.

Once, a few years after Kitty began working with me, I mentioned that I had dyslexia. It must have made an impression on her because I learned that last Friday, in accepting the Illumination Award, she mentioned me as an example of what overcoming dyslexia can lead to.

According to reports of her acceptance remarks, Kitty said it was clear that dyslexia hadn’t held me back even though, like today’s Assets School students, I’m a “different learner” and had to find a way to realize my potential despite a condition that forced me to work twice as hard as my less-challenged counterparts in school and later, throughout my life. Helping kids realize their potential, Kitty said, is what Assets School does for dyslexic students in Hawai‘i today.

If my dyslexia contributed in some way to Kitty’s wish to volunteer her time, energy and extraordinary expertise to benefit Assets School and its talented kids,
I’m touched and grateful. And I’m grateful as well to Assets School for honoring Kitty. Like the well-named school itself, she is an asset to our community who’s doing a great service to hundreds of young people. Their adjustment to learning disabilities will enable them to contribute to our community for decades to come.

Congratulations, Kitty. Your work for Assets School and so many other nonprofit organizations is an inspiration to us all. 