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A MESSAGE FROM RICHARD R. KELLEY TO OUR OUTRIGGER 'OHANA

Celebrating 65 Years:
More Roy Kelley Stories

By Dr. Richard Kelley

Perhaps it is a coincidence or perhaps it is because we are celebrating the 65th anniversary of the founding of Outrigger Enterprises Group, but in the past week, I have been in contact with three different people, all of whom had personal stories about our co-founder Roy Kelley and our company’s operations many, many years ago.

First, let me say that my father Roy was a very complex man. He had an extremely sharp mind with an extraordinary ability to gather and retain facts and make split-second decisions that were usually right. He often came across as gruff and did not suffer fools gladly. He would let you know exactly what he thought or where you were wrong using straightforward language that left many quaking in their boots – or, in beachfront Waikīkī, their sandals. However, Roy also had a very gentle, caring side that very few knew, since he never sought to draw attention to the many thoughtful things he did throughout his life.

Here are the stories of two former employees and a guest.

Henry Chow • Teen-age construction worker, 1944

I chatted with Steven Chow, a wonderful person who services air conditioning units in Honolulu, who mentioned that his Uncle Henry worked for Roy Kelley when Henry was a teenager and that he had fond memories of those years. My assistant Karen Emoto followed up with a telephone call to Henry.

Henry recalled that the year was 1944. He was a small boy, just 14 years old and weighing only about 100 pounds, but determined to work. A teacher at Kamehameha Schools had introduced him to Roy who asked Henry if he was serious about working in construction. When Henry firmly answered, “Yes,” Roy assigned him to Paul Heady, the construction foreman at the wood-framed cottages next door to where the Islander Hotel would soon be built. Henry’s job was to prime pieces of lumber to prepare them for finish painting. He remembers how, at the beginning, he got more paint on his clothes than on the lumber.

One day while Henry was on the job, a centipede got into his pants and badly stung him on the calf. He screamed in pain and was soon somewhat paralyzed. He was rushed to Alsup Clinic, located downtown next to the Kress store, for treatment. He quickly recovered and was ready to go back to work, but Roy Kelley said, “No way. You are going home to rest.” The next day, my father made sure Henry was assigned to light duty.

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When that summer was over, Roy asked him if he wanted to continue working or go back to school. Henry said he wanted to go back to school so he could get his high school diploma, which would enable him to help his family out. He was the eldest of six siblings. Roy told his secretary to go to the Sears Roebuck store and buy him some proper clothes for school. He told Henry that if he needed a job after high school to come back and talk to him.

Henry added, “I feel blessed that Mr. Kelley gave me a chance to work that summer. It was my first job and I feel very grateful. I am very thankful that we had people like him to build up Hawai‘i so well. It is so wonderful.”

Bob Roberts • Pool Attendant 1956

I also recently visited with Bob Roberts, from California, who worked as a swimming pool attendant in the late 1950s, servicing both the Edgewater Hotel and the REEF Hotel across Kalia Road from the Edgewater. Bob’s father, Mike Roberts, was a photographer who took many of the iconic photos of Hawai‘i that adorned the postcards sent by almost every visitor to Hawai‘i in the post-World War II era. I had worked with Mike on many photo shoots around our Waikīkī properties but did not know Bob in those years.

Bob, then about 18 years old, said he worked very hard to keep his assigned pools spotless. He knew Roy was blind in one eye but had exceptionally sharp vision in the other. After a few days on the job, Bob determined which side of the pool was seen by Roy’s good eye and paid particular attention to that area. If Roy found one bit of debris or a stain of suntan lotion on the tile, he would let Bob know about it in no uncertain terms. Once, Roy found a cigarette butt beside the pool, picked it up, put it in Bob’s hand and closed Bob’s fingers around it! Bob said he never let a cigarette butt be found again.

On Sunday mornings, Bob knew he could relax a bit because Roy stayed in his apartment enjoying Estelle Kelley’s famous waffles. But Bob was not alone in those hours. Lyle Guslander, the outspoken CEO of Island Holidays Hotels, who lived in the Holiday Isle Hotel a few steps up Lewers Street, would settle into one of the REEF Hotel’s pool lounge chairs with a straw hat on his head and a cigar between his thumb and index finger. Then he would hold court for all who would listen. When “Gus” departed, Bob would rush to make sure no cigar butts or ashes were left before Roy made his next inspection of the pool area.

Roy let Bob stay in an old wooden shed located in a parking lot across from the Edgewater Hotel. Bob, now the Executive Director of the California Ski Industry Association and formerly the Vice Chairman of the California Travel and Tourism Commission, said he had a great summer in Hawai‘i and learned a lot about focus, dedication and hard work from Roy.

Sheldon Bowles • Hotel Guest 1975

I also heard this week from Sheldon Bowles who wrote me and said, “I remember talking to your dad back around 1975, the year he opened the Outrigger West. My wife Penny and I stayed there the week it opened. They were still putting doors on the showers!

“We were so impressed with the mattresses that we asked at the front desk, ‘Who runs this place? Who is responsible for those great mattresses?’ Your dad’s name was the one given to us. I called the main office and asked to speak to Roy Kelley. He took the call and we had a great talk. I don’t know who was more delighted – Penny and me for having found a hotel where management cared, or your dad for having a guest call who was so obviously enthusiastic and complimentary. I don’t remember the exact details of our conversation, but I do remember that he was very aware of exactly what mattress I was talking about and that it was important to him.

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“To this day, 37 years later, when Penny and I flop down on a hotel mattress anywhere in the world, from Tel Aviv to Santiago, if we like the mattress we say, ‘It’s an Outrigger West.’ If we don’t like it, we say, ‘Roy Kelley wouldn’t have THAT kind of a mattress in one of his hotels!’

“And, again speaking of hotels where management cares, several years later, you, Richard, took my call when my dad had heart issues in Honolulu, and you guided us through the Queen’s Hospital and a pacemaker.”

I wrote back to Sheldon saying, “Roy purchased his mattresses exclusively from a Los Angeles manufacturer named King Karpin. I went to the factory with Roy one day. Everything was hand-made. You are not the only person who likes that mattress. So did Ronald Reagan, John Wayne and Rita Hayworth! The King Karpin mattresses later became the Aireloom Mattress and they say the following in their ads:

The Royal Aireloom Mattress

Very few mattress brands can boast they were the insisted upon choice of U.S. Presidents, or that they were first introduced to the United States to cater to the demanding needs of Hollywood stars. For the Aireloom mattress, these facts are just a matter of course, starting with their creation by King Karpin back in 1949, and progressing all the way into the White House when occupied by the Reagans in the 1980’s. In fact, past owners of the Royal Aireloom mattress is [sic] somewhat a who’s who of the rich and famous, including John Wayne and Rita Hayworth, among many others.

By the way, praise of this sort from Sheldon Bowles is not to be taken lightly as he is a successful entrepreneur in both the petroleum and manufacturing industries, as well as an author and popular speaker on customer service, sales skills and motivation, team building and entrepreneurship. He has co-authored the books Raving Fans, Gang Ho!, Big Bucks!, High Five! and Kingdomality, several of which have been on the New York Times and/or Business Week best seller list.

So there you have it, three different glimpses into the personality of our co-founder Roy Kelley. Our company has changed a great deal in the past 65 years. If Roy were alive today, I’ll bet he would be pleased. Perhaps he would be patrolling the pool deck at the Outrigger Laguna Phuket looking for cigarette butts. He loved Australia and would be excited about our new property, Outrigger Surfers Paradise. He would be very proud of the redevelopment of the Waikiki Beach Walk area. Although he might look around and ask, “Where’s that Roberts kid these days? When he paid attention, he did such a good job at the REEF pool.”

Notes:

1 The Edgewater was demolished in 2005 for the development of the Waikiki Beach Walk buildings.
2 The REEF Hotel is now called Outrigger Reef on the Beach
3 The Outrigger West Hotel is now called OHANA Waikiki West
4 http://www.bestchoicemattress.com/aireloom-mattress.php