Jean Rolles – 30 Years and More!

By Dr. Richard Kelley

This week, we are recognizing members of our ‘ohana who are celebrating special anniversaries of their time with Outrigger Enterprises Group. Included in the list of a dozen or so honorees, you will find my sister Jean Rolles. Yes, officially she has been on the payroll for 30 years, but the truth is she has been with the company for well over twice that long, starting from when she was 11 years old. Someone may well have violated some child labor laws, if they actually existed at the time. But, I’ll let Jean tell the story of her time and experiences with our company in her own words:

Officially I have worked for our company since January 20, 1982, but unofficially I have been involved since I was 11 years old. (That would be the summer of 1946.) My aunt, Iva Webber, started a soda fountain on the beach in front of the old Edgewater Cottages (where the Reef is now located), and I put in eight-hour days working as a “soda jerk” for her all summer. (Those were the days when a Coke cost 10¢, a chocolate soda 15¢, a milk shake 20¢, and if you were a big spender a malt would cost 25¢.)

Almost every summer after that, I was employed at the Edgewater Hotel (where the Embassy Suites® is now located) or the Reef Hotel. I started working as a front desk clerk, then graduated to a telephone attendant, operating an old PBX switchboard with all the plugs and cords. Then I rose to dining room hostess and cashier.

During the summers of my college years, I worked at the front desk of the Reef. In the summer of 1955, while I was a student at the Cornell University School of Hotel Administration, I brought three fellow students to Waikiki to help to open the rooms at the then brand-new Reef. One of those students was Chuck Feeney, who later became the founder of Duty Free Shops and a billionaire philanthropist. Another was Chuck Rolles, the founder of the Chuck's Steak House restaurant chain. The Reef was just being completed. We would assemble a room, make the beds, put towels in the bathroom and then jump over the lanai railing to the neighboring room just as the first guests walked in the door. Then we would start to assemble the next room!

I married Chuck Rolles in 1957, and two years later he opened Chuck's Steak House in the lobby of the Edgewater Hotel. An open lanai was walled off; tables and chairs were purchased; bamboo, fishing nets and glass balls were hung from the ceiling; and second-hand equipment was installed in the kitchen. Nothing was restaurant regulation as the refrigerators were old home units and the dish-washing sink was an old bar sink with the narrow slots.

I came down to the restaurant every day at about 3 p.m. with my toddler son, Scott, to prep the food. Chuck worked at the Reef until 5 p.m. and then walked across the street to set up the salad bar, after which we'd open the doors for business. Chuck waited on tables, and I hand-washed the dishes until midnight.

Those were the humble beginnings of Chuck's Steak House. Over the years the success of this format expanded to Mililani, Pearlridge, Kahala, Hawaii Kai and the Outrigger Waikiki, OHANA East and Reef Towers hotels. In total, at one time, there were 50 Chuck’s Steak Houses across the United States. At various times, as needed, I washed dishes, waited on tables and served as a cocktail waitress. I ended up as the day manager for the Kahala Mall restaurant.

When that restaurant was sold in January 1982, I needed a job.

At that time, my brother Richard Kelley was directly responsible for the Outrigger Waikiki, the Outrigger East, Outrigger West and Outrigger Surf hotels. Pat Moore was his secretary, and the leases for the commercial spaces in those hotels were included in her responsibilities.

Timing is everything in life! Pat wanted to become more involved with the interior decorating side of the company, and since I had a real estate license, Richard gave me the chance to handle the commercial spaces. That job grew from the spaces in five hotels to 300 tenants in 21 hotels. I was a one-person department, and I did everything including writing the leases, negotiating the terms, collecting the rent and changing shop

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locations whenever major hotel renovations were going on – as well as dealing with fires, floods and hurricanes.

I will be forever grateful to Richard for giving me the opportunity, as it was a challenging but rewarding experience. I not only learned on the job but also obtained my Certified Property Manager rating from the Institute of Real Estate Management in Chicago. I was the first hotel person to complete the requirements for the CPM credential, as the hospitality industry was then only just beginning to appreciate how hotels were becoming small shopping centers, an important source of revenue.

In 1999, I was given a new opportunity – to work as Vice President of Community Relations. That means I often represent the company in all types of community situations ranging from charity events, government functions and university meetings to military ceremonies. I am also involved in numerous international meetings through the East-West Center, the Japan-America Society and the Pacific Forum. In addition, I serve on the State Supreme Court’s Disciplinary Board, which holds monthly hearings to recommend sanctions for lawyers accused of unethical conduct. My duties as Vice President of Community Relations run from “A” to “Z,” and I am amazed at the variety of things I am involved with – from planning a formal banquet for the Emperor of Japan to helping choose a new football coach for the University of Hawai‘i. There is never a dull day in Community Relations!

I have been fortunate to watch Outrigger grow from a mom-and-pop operation under my parents Roy and Estelle Kelley, to a full-fledged hospitality company under my brother Dr. Richard Kelley, to a major international corporation under the leadership of David Carey. I have had the honor of knowing a great many of Outrigger’s employees, and they have all been family to me. It has been a privilege to be a part of Outrigger’s history with them.

What is my proudest achievement? I would have to say starting the Aloha Patrol in Waikīkī. Back in 1996, street issues were getting out of hand in Waikīkī, and no one would take responsibility for improving the situation. Working with the Police Department, I set up the Aloha Patrol, with volunteers walking Waikiki’s main streets every night and reporting any irregularities to the police. There were a lot of complexities in getting it started, but it was quite successful for the more than four years of its existence. We reported crimes, found lost children, helped tourists find their way, reported street repairs that were needed and acted as ambassadors of aloha, providing a friendly climate in Waikīkī. Our volunteers came from all communities on O‘ahu, and the work only ended when the Waikīkī Improvement Association created the Waikiki Business Improvement District, which assumed the Aloha Patrol’s functions.

As for my philosophy, I would say I believe in lifelong education. Education has always played an important role in my life and provided the stepping-stones needed to reach my goals. Graduating from college, earning a Certified Property Manager’s rating, gaining a master’s degree in Japanese business – all these have prepared me for each new turn I have taken in life. I encourage everyone to be open to new experiences. I love the words of the Pokémon song “The Power of One”:

The power of one begins with believing.
It starts with the heart and flows thru the soul and changes the world.
There’s a mission for you
Just look inside and you’ll be surprised what you can do!
Each of us holds the key to the power of one.

Thank you, Jean. Those are great memories and great accomplishments. Congratulations for everything you have achieved in a life filled with fascinating “new turns.”