Mildred Courtney Celebrates 50 Years of Service

This week marked Mildred Courtney’s 50th year working for our company. Many friends and associates gathered to honor her and celebrate the occasion. There was also a delicious breakfast followed by a number of tributes to the lady who will continue her role as Corporate Director of Military Sales for Outrigger/OHANA Hotels & Resorts.

Mildred is an amazing woman in many ways. Starting out as a telephone switchboard operator in 1955, she quickly rose in rank to become the Chief Operator. She worked in the basement in front of an old fashioned “plugboard” PBX. It had a rotary dial and a copper-tipped electrical cord for every incoming line and a plug for every room and administrative telephone on the property.

We almost lost Mildred in 1959, when more than nine inches of rain fell on Waikiki during a 24-hour period. Water backed up along Kalia Road and then flooded into the basement of the Outrigger Reef. The basement water level was over head-high. The elevators and power went out, and parked automobiles were bobbing around like boats. Most of the Telephone Operators quickly fled the building. Not Mildred. She refused to “abandon ship.” She kept answering calls, as the waters rose around her feet. When the switchboard finally shorted out, she sought refuge in the narrow space between the top of the switchboard and the ceiling. My brother-in-law, Chuck Rolles, paddled in on a surfboard to rescue her.

After the switchboard was moved upstairs behind the Front Desk, Mildred screened most of the calls that came in for Roy Kelley. If the call seemed important, she would track him down no matter where he was. This was often a challenge because Roy did not keep a calendar or a schedule. He sat at his cluttered desk in the Reef Hotel lobby talking to guests and associates until something diverted his attention elsewhere, whether it was walking over to another hotel, working on plans in a drafting room in the basement, or climbing up to check the placement of steel at a construction site. But Mildred always knew how to find him.

Over time, Mildred essentially took on the job of being Roy’s personal assistant in addition to her job of managing the Telephone department and handling routine guest calls.

She was also our company’s Guest Relations Manager. She took the Hawaii Visitors Bureau tug offshore on boat days and boarded legendary ships such as the Lurline, Monterey, and Matsonia. On board, she greeted, interviewed, and photographed guests and then rushed back to the office to get stories and photos of them in our newspaper, Waikiki Visitor, before the press deadline. The guests loved it and asked for extra copies to send home!

From there, Mildred graduated to Hotel Manager and then to Vice President of the West Kuhio Division of hotels, and later, the Aloha Group of hotels. Having worked with Roy Kelley for so many years, she emulated his philosophies—fill every room every night and carefully watch every expense every day.

Along the way, she recognized the many ways the military is important to our company, our state, and our nation. Mildred was always trying to find reasonably-priced rooms for servicemen and women, participated in activities at military bases, and provided all kinds of support for military personnel. She has helped organize turkey donations at Thanksgiving, given away phone cards during the holidays, and even delivered a truckload of “snow” for
the military base kids to play in at Christmas. She has always understood the feelings and needs of the military and their families, whether it was a Buck Private or a Four-Star General.

After working 35 years, when it came time to pull back from the daily demands of being a Hotel Manager, and at an age when most people would retire, Mildred felt she needed a new challenge and took on the job of working with the military on a full-time basis.

Mildred’s success in this area is the stuff of legend. The past 15 years have been a challenging time to say the least, spanning of the first Iraq war, the terrorist attacks of September 11, and the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Having been a Hotel Manager, Mildred knows how to search within our system when she needs to find one last room on a night when all properties seem to be sold out. Woe be to the Hotel Manager who doesn’t know what’s going on at his or her property, or who isn’t ready to go that extra mile to get a checked-out, vacant room ready, even late in the evening.

With the predicted influx of more military personnel on Oahu in the coming months, Mildred’s job will be even more demanding and challenging.

Mildred has received many awards in recognition of her work along the way (see sidebar), but perhaps the strongest evidence of her value was told in a brief conversation I had recently with retired Marine General Charles C. Krulak in Boulder, Colorado. From 1995 to 1999, General Krulak was the 31st Commandant, the top post in the entire U.S. Marine Corps.

When General Krulak learned I worked for Outrigger/OHANA Hotels & Resorts, he said that he had been stationed in Hawaii for many years and knows our company very well. Then he said, “Mildred Courtney! Now, there’s a lady. I cannot say enough about her and all that she and your company have done for the military in Hawaii.”

It is a real pleasure to be able to recognize Mildred Courtney on the 50th Anniversary of her association with Outrigger/OHANA Hotels & Resorts. Along with thanks, we wish her the very best for the future and hope that she will keep on finding those rooms for the military for many years to come.