Jean Rolles honored
by Waikiki Community Center

By Dr. Chuck Kelley

Last Friday, September 30, the Waikiki Community Center (WCC) honored Jean Rolles, Outrigger’s vice president for community relations, with the Kahiau Award at its annual benefit, Waikiki Lights. Nominated by Waikiki Community Center board member Barbara Campbell, Jean was recognized for her seemingly tireless efforts to improve our community and assist those with needs. Always volunteering on many local boards and selflessly giving of her time and resources, Jean is an example of how much can be accomplished with enthusiasm and dedication. When she speaks about the Waikiki Community Center, Jean is most passionate about its effectiveness in helping local residents of all ages—from preschoolers to senior citizens. The Center provides lifesaving resources to many and a safe, friendly gathering place for locals and visitors alike. We warmly congratulate Jean on earning this well-deserved award.

Founders and partners

By Dr. Richard Kelley

During the past week, as we celebrated the lives of our company’s founders, Roy and Estelle Kelley, the word partners kept coming to my mind. One of the reasons my parents were so successful was that they were true partners in virtually every aspect of their lives.

To illustrate that thought, think about 1929 as the United States (and the world) slipped down the slope and soon crashed into the Great Depression. Roy lost his job when the development project he was working on in California was abruptly shut down. After hearing about a job possibility in the far-off Hawaiian Islands, the young partners boarded a ship and sought a new life in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

The reverse happened a dozen years later when Pearl Harbor was attacked. Fearing a follow-up attack or invasion, many people left Hawai‘i, mostly by ship, since very few airlines served the Islands in 1941. Our family was extremely lucky to get a couple of seats on a Boeing Flying Clipper, the amphibious aircraft (“flying boats”) that Pan American World Airways operated across the Pacific. My mother, my two younger sisters and...
I shared seats or slept on the floor for the 19-hour flight to California. Roy was not on the flight. He gave up his seat so that a child of one of his close friends and architecture partners could fly to safety. (He later joined us in California, after oncoming blindness caused him to fail his military induction physical exam.)

After returning to Hawai‘i in 1944, Roy and Estelle worked side by side, day and night, as dedicated partners to build and open the 50-room Islander Hotel, their first, in 1947. My mother assigned rooms by hand on a roughly two-foot by three-foot lined sheet of paper. She made markings on what we would now call a spreadsheet to keep track of arrivals, departures and occupancy. My sisters and I earned a place in the partnership by washing and folding towels and linen in the back-lot shack used by the housekeeping department.

During the 1950s, we three kids left for the U.S. mainland to pursue our education. When we returned to Hawai‘i roughly a decade later, the Islands were changing rapidly. The fields once used to grow sugarcane and pineapple were being abandoned. Some lands on or near a beach were being converted to resort use.

Jets were replacing slow, propeller-driven aircraft. First they were narrow-bodied, but wide-bodied planes followed, some carrying over 400 passengers!

Those passengers and their crews all needed a place to sleep in the Islands, which became the State of Hawai‘i on August 21, 1959. That, as well as the much-shorter flying time to Hawai‘i, unleashed a torrent of new visitors and generated an urgent need for the development of new hotels. A pending, restrictive change of zoning regulations in Waikiki added even more pressure. How could Roy and Estelle take advantage of these perhaps once-in-a-lifetime opportunities?

As before, they looked for partners. My sister Patricia was asked to run the activities desks in hotel lobbies while her husband, Dick Norstrom, was asked to help develop and operate the 100-room Kalia Inn across from the property we now call the Outrigger Reef Waikiki Beach Resort.

My sister Jean and her husband Chuck Rolles were asked to develop Chuck’s Steakhouse in the Edgewater Hotel. It was the first restaurant in what later became a national chain. Several decades later, however, that hotel and the original restaurant were taken down to make room for the Embassy Suites by Hilton™-Waikiki Beach Walk®.

I received a call from Roy while I was working as a pathologist at The Queen’s Medical Center in Honolulu, asking me to come to his office for an urgent discussion. When I arrived, he asked me to join him as a partner in his new project. Tour operator Robert E. MacGregor and select members of his company, Trade Wind Tours of Hawaii, would also join. Roy took in many other partners for his next seven Waikiki projects. Each partner had a skill that would help get the project completed in those hectic decades.

Roy and Estelle felt the members of our ‘ohana and the communities where our company does business are partners as well. My sisters and I and the next generation of our family have carried on that tradition. Thus, I was very pleased to see my sister Jean recognized last week by the Waikiki Community Center for her work with that vital organization and many others. (See article on Page 1.) In addition, as reported in last week’s Saturday Briefing, Outrigger president and CEO David Carey recently received the Pineapple Award from Pacific Business News for his many outstanding contributions to Hawai‘i and its visitor industry.

Roy and Estelle were not only the founders of our company, but also great partners who provided unique opportunities for many who had the skills and ability to help develop and grow our company in the hectic final decades of the 20th century. I am excited and gratified to see that tradition being carried forward today.
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