Saturday Briefing
OUTRIGGER ENTERPRISES GROUP

November 12, 2011

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

Mildred Courtney Honored with Ihe Award

By Dr. Richard Kelley

This Wednesday, November 9, I had a delightful breakfast with one of Outrigger's longest-serving employees, Mildred Courtney. Actually, we were joined by several hundred more people – like me, all admirers of Mildred, including two tables filled with colleagues from the Outrigger ‘ohana. The occasion: the presentation to Mildred of the 2011 Ihe (Spear) Award by the Hawai’i Army Museum Society (HAMS).

How fitting it was that Mildred was being honored by a volunteer, nonprofit organization dedicated to, among much else, educating the public about the honor, valor and sacrifice of America’s fighting men and women in the defense of freedom and the survival of democracy and the American way of life.

Why so fitting? Because for more than two decades, Mildred has dedicated herself to supporting our nation’s soldiers, sailors, Marines, and airmen and -women stationed in or passing through Hawai’i. She has done this as part of her responsibilities for oversight of Outrigger’s military sales and liaison with the military in Hawai’i.

But, as with everything I have ever seen Mildred do over more than half a century, in fulfilling these responsibilities she has gone light-years beyond the call of duty.

Because she has devoted herself, heart and soul, to the men and women of U.S. military – not only those in uniform but also the family members who support and stand behind them – Wednesday’s breakfast saw an outpouring of warmth and aloha for Mildred, the like of which I have rarely witnessed in my nearly eight decades on this planet.

As just a handful of the thousands – probably tens of thousands – of people she has touched shared some of their experiences with Mildred, both from the podium and in a short video, I was struck by how spontaneously and universally warm and admiring everyone was.

“The most giving and caring person I have ever met,” was the way one speaker described her.

“Passionate,” said someone else – soon followed by the observation that Mildred’s passion is “infectious.”

HAMS’ president, retired General David A. Bramlett, said that whatever the situation, “Mildred Courtney will help. … All she has to know is that the need is there.” Then, he added, she’ll ask, “What is needed and what can I do?”

And, the general noted, she’s persistent and doesn’t take “no” for an answer when she turns to colleagues for assistance, looking, for example, for “one last room tonight” for a military family in need of accommodation. “When Mildred comes to you and asks for help it’s hard to say ‘no’ – and it can be hazardous to your health,” he joked.

Major General Robert G.F. Lee, Hawai’i’s former adjutant general, now retired from the Army National Guard, called Mildred “absolutely dependable.”

David Carey noted that Mildred “started with Outrigger before I was born,” and mused, “You’d think that someone who’s been in a job for over 50 years would lose a bit of her edge, but not Mildred!”

Mildred responded to all the praise with characteristic humility, thanking Outrigger for giving her the opportunity to do something she finds tremendously fulfilling. “There isn’t anything that gives me more pleasure,” she said.

This is a sentiment I’d like to turn around and add my expression of gratitude to those that were so beautifully spoken Wednesday morning: “Thank YOU, Mildred, for taking this opportunity,” as you so graciously call it, and turning it into a reality greater than any of us could have imagined. And warmest congratulations on a richly deserved honor.”
56 Years of Exceeding the Call of Duty

By Dr. Richard Kelley

Recounting all amazing things that Mildred Courtney has done in her 56 years with Outrigger would take more pages than there are in this newsletter. So let me simply pull a few highlights out of my memory – and from the Saturday Briefing archives.

Mildred began her career with Outrigger on May 29, 1955. She jokes, “I rolled in with the first pile of lumber and literally started at the bottom – in the basement of the Outrigger Reef as a Switchboard Operator.”

There she worked in front of an old fashioned “plugboard” PBX. It had a rotary dial and a copper-tipped cord for every incoming line and a plug for every room and administrative telephone on the property. She quickly rose to become our Chief Operator.

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 flooded into the basement of the Outrigger Reef. The water 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,” continuing to answer calls as the waters rose around her. 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.

Later, 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, whether it was walking over to another hotel, working on plans in a drafting room in the basement, or climbing up to check on 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 managing the Telephone Department and handling routine guest calls.

She was also our Guest Relations Manager. She took the Hawaii Visitors Bureau tugboat 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 philosophy—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. After working 35 years, when it came time to pull back from the daily demands of managing hotels, and at an age when most people would retire, Mildred felt she needed a new challenge. She took on the job of working with the military on a full-time basis.

Mildred is always trying to find reasonably priced rooms for servicemen and -women, participating in activities at military bases, and providing all kinds of support for military personnel. She has helped organize turkey donations at Thanksgiving, given away phone cards during the holidays, collected books for the sailors on ships heading out to sea, and even delivered truckloads of “snow” for 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.

Mildred’s success in finding reasonably priced rooms is the stuff of legend. Having been a Hotel Manager, she 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 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.

Mildred has received many awards along the way, but perhaps the strongest evidence of her value came in a brief conversation I once had in Boulder, Colorado, with retired Marine Corps General Charles C. Krulak. 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 Hawai‘i 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 Hawai‘i.”

I am deeply honored to have Mildred represent our company in her undying devotion to the U.S. military and to the State of Hawai‘i.

Mildred humbly says she does what she does because “it’s the right thing to do.” All I can say is, “She is simply amazing!”