

Donna Wong Highlights

By Scott Foster

To the general public, Kailua resident Donna Wong's name probably wouldn't register. But ask any seasoned environmental advocate in Hawai'i. They will know -- because for nearly 30 years, Donna Wong has championed a litany of prominent environmental issues in our island state and mentored dozens of citizens who have either been attracted to her projects or were told by somebody to "Try call Donna Wong." Donna's advocacy journey began in 1980 when in frustration, her sister said, "Stop complaining and run for the Kailua Neighborhood Board!"

Married to a Waimanalo boy and with three children (Kekoa, Kanani, and Keaka), Donna had been a "stay-at-home" mom. While she had been active in the PTA, was a Team Mother, and active in the Olomana Community Association, the Honolulu Neighborhood Board system was a whole new world for her; serious politics. She ran and was elected. Donna later said, "I naively thought, if only government officials knew the laws they would do the right thing. It didn't take me long to learn that government usually only acts properly when watch-dogged by citizens." And 29-years later "and zillions of hours" of talking, educating and advocating, Donna Wong is still fighting for the same goal -- to empower people with knowledge so they can participate in the decision making process and force public officials to uphold the laws.

In the mid-1980's, Donna fought changing a state law to allow golf courses as a permitted use on agriculturally zoned land. She lost that battle so she co-founded Hands Around O'ahu to help educate people about the negative impacts of golf courses. Donna notes, "The Japanese investment and development boom had just begun and foreign owned golf course proposals were popping up in every community on every island. People were frantic for information about who these new investors were and how their development would impact their community. It was a struggle and took us all; local residents, farmers, Hawaiians and community activists and we even made several trips to Japan to appeal for help to stop the influx of golf courses. In the end, very few golf courses were built in Hawai'i."

In her humble way, Donna tends to leave out the details about how it all finally ended. First there was the article in NEW YORKER MAGAZINE and then came the explosive one-hour PBS Frontline special, The Fixers. As one national journalist put it, "The Fixers follows the intriguing trail of a wheeling and dealing husband-wife team – a tale of political corruption on a massive scale which began in rural Hawai'i and ended at the White House." Read a script of the PBS interview with Donna Wong at:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/fixers/>>

The fact of the matter is, Donna Wong has had a key role in some of the most important land and water use decisions in recent Hawai`i history and she has organized and brought thousands together in the process. Donna says, "As an island state it is difficult and expensive to meet face to face with neighbor island colleagues and I co-founded the Aloha 'Aina Congress as a statewide network to bring people together to discuss how to collectively fight bad legislation and promote good environmental and land use legislation.

Bringing Hawaiians and environmentalists together created a strong force. We stopped many bad bills, learned that we had similar issues, earned each other's trust, and successfully broke down the ocean barrier between islands by establishing e-mail networks."

In 1990, Donna joined Hawaii's 1000 Friends (HTF) as their executive director and she's still at it 19 years later. She says, "I continue my goal to empower people with knowledge by providing them information on legislation, Hawaii's laws, environmental and land and water use issues, government and legislative processes and misdeeds through our statewide email network and our website"

<www.hawaii1000friends.org>