

A Polynesian Sister

It was good to be back in the Hawaiian Islands for a visit with Life Care's four buildings – Ka Punawai Ola in Kapolei on the island of Oahu, Hale Anuenue Restorative Care Center and Life Care Center of Hilo, both in the city of Hilo, and Life Care Center of Kona, on the other side of the Big Island. Don Giardina, Cathy Murray, my wife, Lola, and I had gone there the week of May 9 specifically to present the Mountain States Division Whatever It Takes award at Hale Anuenue. In the process, we toured the other buildings, met with staff and were entertained royally by our gracious associates at each stop.

The Whatever It Takes ceremony was conducted at Hale Anuenue on Tuesday afternoon, May 10. We were there to honor Elizabeth (Iwa) Clarke, a certified restorative nurse aide. Her qualities of unselfishness, dedication and faithfulness as she serves our residents are truly remarkable.

As one example, one of the residents of the facility, the widow of a once-prominent local leader, wanted very much to attend a ceremony in October 2004 conducted by the Memories of Hawaii opening its Hawaii Plantation Museum in which it honored 10 Legends of Hawaii for their accomplishments in sports as well as in community service throughout their careers. Among those legends was Ung-Soy (Beans) Afook, the resident's husband, a native of Hilo who was a star in baseball, football, track, swimming and basketball. He later became head coach for the Hilo High Vikings basketball team. During his 15 years of coaching there, his teams won 13 consecutive Territorial Basketball Championships. In 1983, the County Council of Hawaii renamed the Civic Auditorium in Hilo the Afook-Chinen Civic Auditorium, a tribute to him and another sports figure, Richard Chinen.

It appeared that Mrs. Afook would not be able to attend. That's when Iwa stepped in. She took it upon herself to arrange to take the resident out on pass on her day off in order to be a part of the ceremony. She came in early to be certain the resident was appropriately dressed and groomed.

But that's a pattern of commitment that Iwa regularly exhibits. She anonymously purchases shoes and clothing for residents whose personal funds do not allow them to buy these items for themselves. She often takes home favorite articles of residents' clothing that require hand-washing to accommodate their desires to look their best. She is, indeed, a model of the Whatever It Takes attitude and behavior in customer service.

When the time of the ceremony came, a great crowd had assembled at the facility. It included state and local government representatives, Chamber of Commerce and other business leaders, associates and family members. As

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many as 200 were there to honor this extraordinary woman – who had no clue what was about to happen, or the purpose of the meeting.

President Don Giardina announced that Iwa had been chosen as the Mountain States Whatever It Takes winner, and asked her to come forward to receive her framed award certificate and cash prize. She appeared stunned as she made her way to the stage, and I helped her up the steps while the audience arose in a loud and long standing ovation. As she turned to face the crowd, I started to step away from her; since the ceremony was being videotaped, I wanted the camera to focus on her and Giardina as he read the certificate proclaiming her honor.

She wouldn't turn loose of my hand, however, and whispered to me: "Don't leave me now. I'm not sure I can handle this by myself." It was obvious that she was very nervous before such a large crowd – perspiration had popped out on her brow, and I could feel the heat of her body. I stayed with her, with my arm around her.

After Giardina had presented the certificate and the money, Iwa and I walked to the microphone. I said to her, "Iwa, although I have just met you, I sense in your spirit that you do what you do for our residents as your gift to the Lord."

Still trembling, she spoke distinctly into the microphone, "I believe Jesus has brought me here in the first place, and I put Jesus first, before my residents, and I believe He has blessed me in everything that I do. He is always first." Her faith, then, spills out in service to those she meets.

As she was talking, I stood there thinking about the missionaries who had come to these islands in 1820. These early messengers of the gospel were often vilified and criticized for – it is alleged – destroying a beautiful island culture.

And yet, here stood a hillbilly boy from East Tennessee beside a Polynesian native, a direct descendant of those island inhabitants in the 1820s, and although we had just met, we were brother and sister because of Christ and the faithfulness of these missionaries to share the good news.

--Beecher Hunter