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UH business school honors three family-owned companies

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The University of Hawaii College of Business Administration this week honored three locally owned family businesses that have survived Hawaii's changing economic climate for nearly three generations.

Awards went to Enterprise Development Inc., dba House of Hong; Slim's Power Tools; and Maui Varieties Ltd.

Enterprise Development Inc., dba House of Hong

Leslie Hong started in the family business as a cashier and bartender while in college. Now president of Enterprise Development and Hong's Enterprise ♦ parent of House of Hong restaurant ♦ Hong says he evolved into the business under his father's tutelage.

His father, Raymond, and his family started the business in 1943, purchasing a small outdoor bar and grill in Moiliili. Raymond, his two brothers, sister and brother-in-law turned the new venture into Charley's Tavern and later added apartment buildings and a chop suey restaurant to the operations.

The family opened a small retail shop on Lewers Street in Waikiki in 1955 and later opened House of Hong restaurant in the same building. The restaurant has been an active part of Waikiki for nearly 40 years, sponsoring the annual Lewers Street Chinese Lion Dance for Chinese New Year.

The family currently operates four businesses on Lewers Street ♦ House of Hong, Charley's Tavern, The Original Chuck's Steakhouse and Lewers Street Loft and Lanai.

"The foundation was established by my father; he primarily built the whole thing up," Leslie Hong said. "We were fortunate [that] when my father passed away there was no debt. He didn't leave us a lot of money, but he did leave us an opportunity to make a living [with] a business that was running well."

Two generations of the Hong family have been involved in the family enterprises. While Leslie Hong heads operations, his wife Carolyn and sister Gail run the office. His brother Jerry works nights at House of Hong while brother Glenn conducts family business meetings.

Slim's Power Tools

Iwao "Slim" Okemura started Slim's Power Tools in 1972 in a Mapunapuna warehouse, sharing the facility with other companies. After eight months, the business moved to Kalihi, where it operated for 11 years.

Today, Slim's can be found near Nimitz Highway on Republican Street with all four of Slim's sons, in-laws and grandchildren working in the business in some capacity.

"We all wear different hats because we're a small business," said son Rand Okemura, comptroller and marketing manager. "We did it part time while we were going to high school and college. Slim showed us the way, the leadership that we needed to follow. We all kind of just evolved into it."

Rand Okemura says family members all found a different niche in the company.

"We all started from the bottom," he said. "I started off driving a pickup truck, delivering. Three of the wives work here. We have couple of grandchildren working part time during the summer, mostly doing stocking."

While it is often difficult to survive, especially as a small business in Hawaii's economic landscape, there are advantages to working as a family, Rand Okemura said.

"You just get things off your chest faster," he said. "In hindsight, I wouldn't want to be doing anything else. It's good that I get to see [family] every day."

Maui Varieties Ltd.

Guy Kamitaki's grandmother, Shikane, started Kamitaki Dry Goods Store on Maui in the 1940s. In 1951, his father, Tadami, and aunt, Matsuko Mizoguchi, opened the first Ben Franklin franchise at the Kahului Shopping Center.

The family opened additional Ben Franklin Stores on the Big Island, Maui and Oahu. In 1984, the family introduced Ace Hardware to the Big Island in Hilo. Today, they operate 20 Ben Franklin Crafts and Ace Hardware Stores statewide and in Japan.

While Tadami Kamitaki and Mizoguchi act as advisers to the company, Guy Kamitaki, along with his brother, sister and two cousins, all play a role in the businesses' success.



"Doing business in Hawaii is tough, especially in retail," he said. "There's more competition coming into Hawaii."

An advantage of running a business with your family is the trust and commitment involved, Guy Kamitaki said.

"You grew up with your brother, sister and cousins," he said. "You know each other well; you tend to work together better. There's a high level of trust and understanding. We've survived because we work in the business as well as own it."

While there is a family obligation to joining the business, commitment and desire is key to its continued success, Kamitaki said.

"It's really the drive of people like my dad and brother, their drive and desire to build and grow," he said. "It's got to take somebody with that kind of drive and desire [to carry on family tradition]."

UH's Family Business Center of Hawaii  created in 1995 through partnerships between the College of Business Administration and the business community  provides educational opportunities and forums for 20 to 25 family-business members.