



Doing the Right Thing

by Karee Carlucci

“Do the right thing, and business will benefit,” says **Jerry Kunitomo '78**, owner-operator of BJ's Chicago Pizzeria in Lahaina and driving force behind a successful array of Lahaina Town festivals. Contributing to nine prestigious Maui events and a member of more than 20 community organizations makes Jerry a very busy man. “There are so many people working long hours to resurrect a cultural component in Maui, that I feel fortunate to have returned home to help give back to our community,” he says.

Born and raised in Kona, Jerry entered Kamehameha as a 7th grade boarder. Summers and long weekends were spent working on his family's coffee farm or fishing for 'ahi. “That experience taught me a lot about the old ways,” he says. “I was pretty kua'āina in school.”

Graduating in 1978, Jerry roomed with friend **Wallace Wong '77** for one semester at Kapi'olani Community College before moving to California to study law, engineering and architecture.

Architecture piqued his interest and by 1984 he opened his own

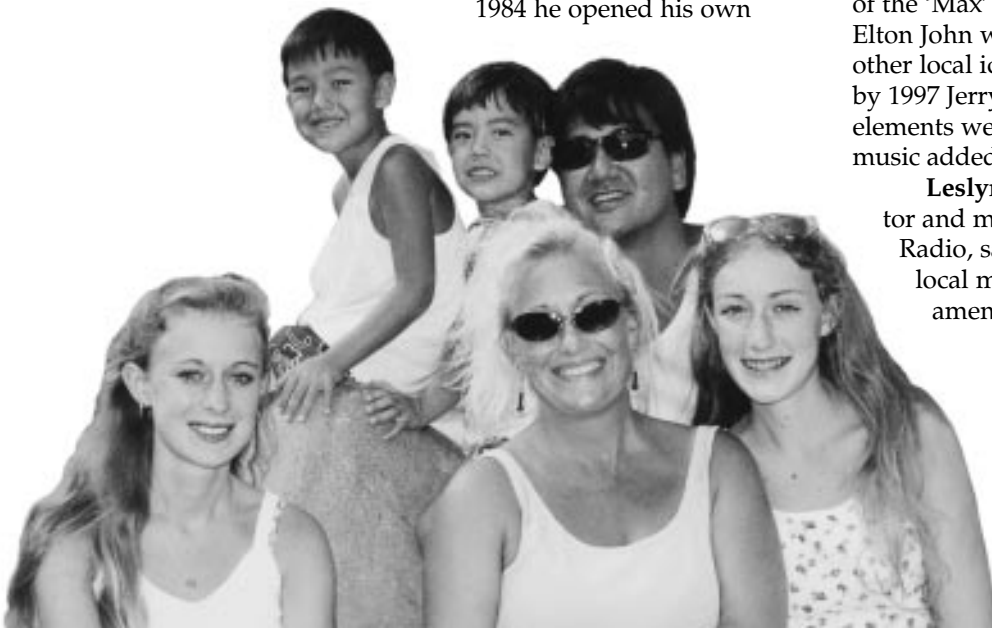
Newport Beach firm. “I found that I had to work too hard at it, like putting a square peg into a round hole. With effort, the peg may fit but it doesn't look good,” he explains.

So, Jerry returned to the restaurant business that supported him through school. In 1982 he was hired as a busboy, but after a year, Jerry found himself among three managers running Maxwell's, an elegant Huntington Beach pier restaurant. “All the employees were in their 30s and I, at 22, was their boss. I grew up fast! But, hard to sound suave with thick pidgin flowing,” he laughs.

By 1986, Jerry joined the Tony Romas franchise and watched the company grow immensely within just a few years. By 1994 his operational talent came to the attention of BJ's Chicago Pizzeria, which had just acquired its Front Street Lahaina location at the site of the former Blue Max. Jerry was offered a partnership and he jumped at the chance to return home.

“I wanted to continue the global recognition of the 'Max' but with an island feel. Instead of Elton John we would feature Dennis Pavao and other local icons.” BJ's opened in June 1994 and by 1997 Jerry doubled his sales. “All operational elements were critical, but access to Hawaiian music added a whole new dimension and value!”

Leslyn Alaka'i Paleka '74, program director and morning DJ for Lahaina's KPOA Radio, says: “Every night at BJ's restaurant, local musicians play. Jerry feels it's an amenity, like air-conditioning!”



The Kunitomo family today (l-r, back row) Andrew, 7, Aaron, 5, and Jerry; (front row) Jenny, 19, Morgan and Kristal, 15



LEFT—At BJ's in Lahaina are (l-r, front) BJ's managers Vivas Kane and Lance Yamaguchi. In the back row (l-r) are Ocean Kaowili '79, Dennis Kamakahi '71, Pekelo Cosma, Jerry and Eddie Kamae



BELOW—Jerry and Morgan Kunitomo with pal Keali'i Reichel

Resurrecting Hawaiian cultural components in Lahaina was so energizing, Jerry involved himself with the Lahaina Town Action Committee (LTAC), staging events that created entertainment opportunities with Hawaiian music as the juice. "Everyone – from the Brothers Caz (**Robert '67** and **Roland Cazimero '68**), Keali'i Reichel, **Dennis Kamakahi '71**, the Pahinui brothers, Dennis Pavao, Hapa, Kapena and Eddie Kamae & the Sons of Hawai'i – has helped out."

"Jerry is involved in every event we do," says Theo Morrison, executive director of LAC. "He's integrated Hawaiian culture into our festivals through music and that has created a tremendous draw for us. Attendance at our events has increased each year."

Taking charge of the musical entertainment for Maui's famous Taste of Lahaina festival in 1995, Jerry has watched "Taste" draw the largest attendance of any comparable Maui festival. "A Taste of Lahaina started it all," says Alaka'i. "Jerry knew that if people could see island entertainment at the event, it would make it even more successful." Making an ambitious prediction for "Taste" to grow 20 percent annually, Jerry surpassed his own projections by the festival's third year.

Jerry's work with other Lahaina events has witnessed similar growth by promoting cultural tourism. Jerry steered the 1998 Festival of Canoes from a one- to ten-day event by 1999. Participating master carvers from throughout the South Pacific have suggested the Festival of

Canoes as a model for Pacific Island cultural tourism. Plus, "These events are very important for our children," says Jerry. "When we were young, much of what we learned came from what surrounded us. Today much of that cultural environment is gone. We must create opportunities for our children to see and learn the way it was."

Jerry also serves on several community and non-profit boards. He works with the Lahaina Intermediate School Community Based Management program and Maui Community College's VITEC and RISE programs. "Working closely with the Maui Police Department, Jerry has helped create a healthier atmosphere in town," says MPD Sgt. **Everett Ferreira '73**. He's also a member of the Native Hawaiian Tourism Hospitality Association, led by President **Douglas Chang '78**. And, Jerry works with the Friends of Moku'ula toward restoration of a royal complex that dates to Lahaina's days as capital of the Kingdom of Hawai'i.

The proud father of two boys and two girls, Jerry says it's his solid foundation and wonderful wife and partner Morgan that together have enabled him to do all he does. "Kamehameha gave me a solid foundation on which to build a successful career. My entire experience at KS was so short-lived, yet the legacy of Princess Bernice Pauahi Bishop has lasted a lifetime."



Jerry Kunitomo at Kamehameha in 1978

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