

SCOTT FOSTER & ASSOCIATES

Providing marketing communications, political strategy and public-opinion management consultation to musicians, artists, and progressive organizations

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ABOUT DONNA WONG

By Scott Foster

To the general public, Kailua, Hawai'i 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 on April 14, 1997, 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>

Two important components of the HTF website are the *Public Trust Doctrine* and *Knowledge of The Laws*. Donna notes, “Understanding of the Doctrine is relatively unknown so we are working to make our site a sort of one-stop-shop for information on the *Public Trust Doctrine*, and our *Knowledge of The Laws Project* introduces the visitor to Hawaii's environmental and land use laws. The purpose is to empower people with knowledge so that they are better prepared to fight against undesirable, destructive, polluting and unlawful development and force decision makers to uphold the law.”

In 1993, Wong was approached by attorneys from the *Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund* (now *Earth Justice*) who were representing the Waiahole taro farmers. Sugar had shut down on Oahu and the taro farmers wanted the water that had been diverted from Windward streams to Leeward sugar production restored to Windward streams. Arguing the Public Trust Doctrine, HTF joined Waiahole farmers in pleading their case before the State Water Commission six-month appeal. After exhausting all state remedies, they appealed an unacceptable decision to the Hawai'i Supreme Court who handed down a landmark decision that “Hawaii's water resources are held in trust for all of Hawaii's people.” Despite that decision, a rightful amount of water has yet to be returned to the Windward streams and HTF and Earth Justice continue to challenge the state of Hawai'i. SEE <<http://www.hawaii1000friends.org/about.php>>

One could go on and on about Donna Wong's many unheralded accomplishments. For instance, her invaluable early role in advising the *Stewards of Waimea Valley* on ways to approach saving Waimea Valley, and assisting the recent creation by her latest protégé of the *Livable Hawai'i Kai Hui* now fighting for the protection of the remaining small farms in Hawai'i Kai and along the Ka Iwi Coast.

But Donna Wong's “dream project” is to go out to communities statewide and provide citizens with information on state and county land use, environmental and cultural protection laws and processes so they are prepared to participate in the governmental processes and fight for their local issues.

In Donna's own words, “It's not fair or pono that caretakers of a reconstructed heiau in Kona that is threatened with destruction from nearby development did not know they could have participated in the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) process. Or because citizens were unaware of the Development Plan process, the zoning was changed to allow the worlds' largest Wal-Mart to be constructed next to a small, old community in urban Honolulu. Or that the agriculturally-zoned land farmed by many small farmers could be rezoned to urban type uses without their knowledge or input because they lease from large landowners and their farming activities are not recognized.”

“Without knowing how and when to participate in planning processes landowners, developers and consultants who know how the system works and how to work the system will continue to be in control. In more cases than not, the public only finds out about a project when a bulldozer appears. At that late stage, the public's only recourse is usually to go to court and that is very costly and time consuming. It is my goal to change these dynamics so that citizens can be in charge of their communities -- instead of being run over by development interests.”

On Tuesday, March 24, 2009, Donna Wong, “advocate, mentor and champion of land and water issues in Hawai`i” received The Hawai`i State Commission on Status of Women's highest award as their Women's History Month honoree during a Washington Place reception with the governor in attendance. The Commission wrote, “Donna Wong has been and remains one of the most knowledgeable and staunchest defenders of Hawai'i's fragile environment in modern history.”

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1990 – PRESENT

HAWAII’S THOUSAND FRIENDS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Research, evaluate and testify before state legislature, Honolulu City Council, various Boards and Commissions on environmental, land and water issues. Network with other organizations and individuals statewide, nationally and internationally. Review State and County statutes and regulations, respond to Environmental Impact Statements and other State and County permit applications. Oversee day-to-day operations, fundraise and manage budgets, hire and fire staff and consultants, plan and manage projects and programs.

1980 – PRESENT

KAILUA NEIGHBORHOOD BOARD

Elected by residents of Kailua for fourteen consecutive two-year terms to the Kailua Neighborhood Board. Planning, Zoning and Environment Committee chairperson 2000 to present. Served as Chairperson of the Planning and Zoning committee for thirteen years and Board Chairperson for two years.

PRESENT AFFILIATIONS

- Member 2007 – present – State Marine and Coastal Zone Management Advisory Council. Appointed by the Director of State Office of Planning.
- Board member – Kawainui Heritage Foundation. Mission: to protect Kawainui Marsh, the largest remaining emergent wetland and ancient freshwater fishpond in Hawai`i and only Ramsar site in Hawai`i and the Pacific.
- Board member – Conservation Voters of Hawai‘i

PAST AFFILIATIONS

- Board member – Kailua Bay Advisory Council
- Board member – Common Cause Hawai`i
- Board member – Olomana Community Association
- Board member – Heeia Kea/Pali Restoration Advisory Board
- Board member – Ke Kula ‘o Samuel M. Kamakau, Laboratory Public Charter School
- Member – State Sustainable Tourism Working Group
- Member – State Agricultural Working Group
- Member – Governor Cayetano’s Economic Task Force
- Member - Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund Hawai‘i Advisory Board

CO-FOUNDER

- Coalition of native Hawaiian and Environmental Organizations (now KAHEA)
- Save Mt. Olomana Association
- Aloha ‘Aina Congress
- Hands Around Oahu
- Nui Malama ‘Aina O Maunawili
- Hawai‘i Land Defense Coalition

RECOGNITIONS

- 1984 - Mayor Anderson, City and County of Honolulu
Recognition for assisting Department of General Planning in long range planning for the island of O‘ahu.
- 1987- Kawai Nui Heritage Foundation
Recognition of work on the Kailua Neighborhood Board balancing economic needs and natural resource protection
- 1998 – State House of Representatives
Recognition of community involvement, formation of networking and cultural and natural resources protection organizations and executive director of Hawaii’s Thousand Friends.
- 2003 Windcall – recognized as a social justice leader was awarded a two week retreat a ranch in Montana sponsored by Windcall, for 20 years has developed and sustained social justice leadership.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

- 2000 Producer, *Managing Hawaii’s Public Trust Doctrine Symposium* video,
- 2002 Producer, *Small Farmer’s Survival Project Report*,
- 2001 Hawai‘i Community Foundation *Conservation Leadership Training*,