

Special
Tribute
to
Denis C.H.
Leong

LEGAL ALERT

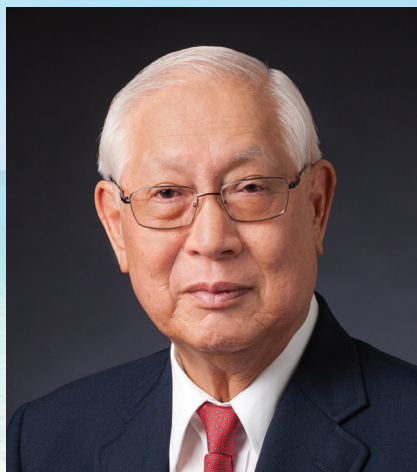
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DAMON KEY LEONG KUPCHAK HASTERT
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In Memoriam



Denis C.H. Leong

1942 - 2023

Married to Diantha "Cookie" Lam
Father of Evan, Darin, and Tishya
Grandfather of 8 Grandchildren

Attorney, Damon Key Leong Kupchak Hastert 1970 to 2023
Attorney at Law, State of Hawaii and City and County of Honolulu, 1967-1970
U.S. Army/Army Reserve, 1966 - 1967
George Washington University Law School, J.D., 1966
Oregon State University, B.S., 1963
Punahou School, 1959



Aloha Denis Leong, Friend & Leader

Remembering Denis through his own words

By Kenneth R. Kupchak

Earlier this year, our firm lost a vital and transformative team member and leader who helped to guide us through decades of growth, change, and stability. Beyond lending his name for the door and letterhead of our law firm, Denis Leong's legacy continues to impact us in countless ways. As Denis' teammate for 52 years, I offer a retrospective about our colleague, mentor, and friend. It is based, in part, on an interview with Denis a few years ago.

The Early Years

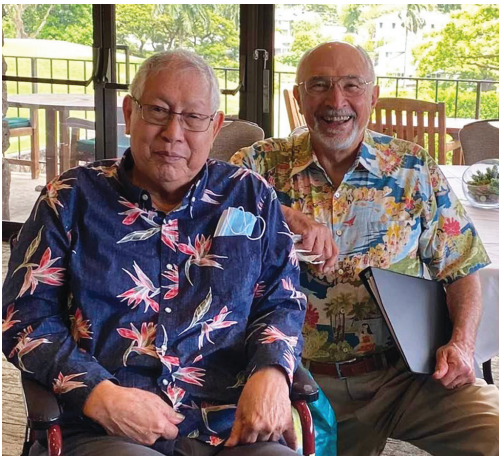
Denis spent his earliest days on Kaumana Lane, a street that no longer exists, near what is now Safeway on Vineyard which, in early 1942, was a network of small houses on small dirt roads. When he was six years old, the family moved to Kaimuki and Denis was accepted to both Iolani and Punahou. He was given the choice of which school he wanted to attend.

Denis recalled, "The guy is pressing my father and my father is pressing me and says, 'You want to go to Iolani or Punahou?' I responded, 'Who has the better football team?' My father looks down and says 'Punahou.' And I went there - that was it."

Denis' Class of 1959 was the last Punahou class to have "Territory of Hawaii" on their diplomas. So, it was not on the diplomas of any of his siblings, all of whom eventually followed. "So... how these things change the direction of more than you, but also your family is amazing," Denis reflected.

The second oldest in a family with four children, Denis' extended family was also large. At one point Denis estimated that he had over 50 first cousins, saying, "I don't know who they are. I don't know if I've seen them all? My mother would say, at the grocery store, 'that's your cousin,' well I didn't know. So, when you go around, and you talk to people, you find out there are a lot of connections. You've got to watch what you are doing, and other people need to watch what they are doing, because it will come back."

Denis spent his days in Kaimuki playing ball in the streets with the neighborhood kids. Graduating from Punahou, Denis went to a mainland college. "I went to Oregon State because you received in-state tuition and the application was just one side and no essay. I had never left Hawaii before. I chose the in-state tuition because I wanted to help out in my own way," commented Denis.



At Oregon State., Denis remembers, "The Punahou guys were all over the place, all joined fraternities. Stanley Hong was in a fraternity. He was graduating and came to recruit me. Now here I am, even though I had met him at Punahou, I had no idea what a fraternity was or how it worked or any of that. Anyway, I joined. And of course, I am the only oriental in Phi Kappa Sigma. It makes a difference, a huge difference, not only how you develop, but where you end up. Because all roads are about relationships and it makes a huge difference how you create and sustain relationships. And I was pretty good too, you know and lucky, perhaps, that Punahou was better in football?"

During the summers, while home from Oregon State, he worked in construction and built condominiums and housing on Schofield. “I didn’t like it,” Denis said about his laborer status. “I’d rather be the supervisor looking down and watching what ‘they’ are doing. But you learn little by little and in college about people and how people react to people. All construction people are hard workers. As it was a non-union general multi-purpose construction company you did everything. It comes time to pour concrete, you pour concrete. It comes time to carry and I carry.” For 50 years, Denis was the firm’s construction boss. He kept a robust tool kit in his office and he would fix every door, drawer, or anything that might go haywire. He even built my first “office”, which was a loosely, semi-partitioned area that also served as my law school classmate Bill Shannon’s office and the firm’s lounge.

Denis graduated in 1963. He said, “I really didn’t know much about anything. I had an offer from Sears & Roebuck in San Francisco. Vietnam was looming.” Denis’ friend Mickey Hong was applying for law school and Denis decided to do the same. “So, I went to George Washington (“GW”) and Mickey to American and we roomed together.”

On the afternoon of November 22, 1963, Denis was in his dorm when someone said “[t]he President was shot.” Being only a few blocks from the White House they walked over to see what was happening. In Denis’ words, “It was a typical East Coast day, a slight misty rain really dreary. Helicopters are coming through and the atmosphere was one of ‘we are lost.’ We don’t know what to do. We don’t know what is happening, but I had a very heavy feeling,” said Denis.

At the time, GW Law had large classes with very few women. Hiram Fong was a senator during Denis’ law school days. “His wife, Helen and her sister were there and knew that I was coming and were waiting for me,” said Denis. The Fongs were very good to Denis. Helen’s sister had a daughter who soon became Mrs. Denis Leong, aka Cookie. “Cookie was two years behind me at Punahou. Neither of us had a clue who the other was. Cookie was with a group that worked on the school newspaper. You know, the older, smarter Chinese girls. And I was in the academic margin—a different group, albeit that we knew a lot of the same people. As Cookie’s mother was Ellyn’s sister, Cookie, during Vassar college breaks, would visit the Fong’s, her Aunt and Uncle, in D.C.,” explained Denis. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Meanwhile, the 1960’s continued to unfold around Denis, who had a front row seat to the season of change, living in DC. “There were riots in DC with a lot of burning on 14th Street. They burned the whole place (14th) down.” said Denis.

While Denis attended law school, Cookie followed her own path. “When she [Cookie] graduated, I still had a year of law school to complete. So she stayed in DC to work for the CIA as an analyst. Her class, all women, was trained in aerial surveillance, etc. It was great. One year later they were all gone. They all had computer training which put them all in a position to obtain computer jobs- all of them. The government retained none of them. They worked at the CIA’s Langley headquarters. One building. No sign,” Denis added. This did, however, launch Cookie in her computer career.

Denis graduated from law school in 1966. His chance meeting with Cookie at the Fong’s, her Aunt’s and Uncle’s home and his “Vacation” from his apartment matured and they remained a team. With his student deferment over, it was either be drafted, find an exemption or join the Reserves. Denis signed up for the Army Reserve, based at Fort Ord, then specialty training in Supply at Fort Lee.



Coming Home

When the two returned home to Hawaii, they both began their careers. According to Denis, fresh from CIA computer training, “Cookie moved right into working on the creation of the UH computer system. It was a huge IBM mainframe using punch cards and taking up the space of two floors in an air-conditioned space - always cold.” While Cookie was set at the University of Hawaii as an integral part of the creation of its first computer system, Denis had to take the bar and then find someone who would take a chance and hire him.

After he passed the Bar Exam, he joined the Corporation Counsel at the City and County of Honolulu in its “drafting” section where he mostly wrote opinions. Neal Blaisdell was the Mayor at the time. Neal was a Republican. Senator Fong was a Republican, and Hiram Fong Junior was a Republican and began running for local office. Denis became Hiram Fong Junior’s campaign chairman. Junior won by one vote—it was front page news.

At some point, Frank Fasi became Mayor and Denis moved on from politics. Denis recalled that he spent “[s]ix months with the City working for Norman Chung. Then I became a Deputy AG, (Bert Kobayashi, Sr. was the Attorney General). I was assigned to the DOT, with its office in the Transportation Bldg. on Punchbowl. But everyone kept telling me, ‘Don’t stay too long in Government.’”

And he didn’t stay long. Denis joined the Damon Shigekane firm in 1970, then in the Melim building, as the fifth attorney, just three years out of law school. “When I arrived at the firm, it was expanding its office to accommodate me and eventually Mike Doran by pushing through the dry wall into the next space. The existing space was separated during on-going construction by a hanging plastic sheet. I had the office just Ewa of the plastic sheet— it was pretty dusty.”

In the early ‘70s, Hawaii was growing, as were most law firms like Damon Key, to take advantage of the inpouring of post Statehood investment. At that time the largest firm in the State was only 26 lawyers and that firm’s lawyers were spread between Islands.

Denis recalls, “Henry was out of Town when Vernon [Char] and Charlie [Key] made their deal [to join the Damon firm]. Henry’s view was ‘I heard that Charlie was a good lawyer.’ Over time he got used to it and was ok with it.” Thus, at the ripe old firm age of 8½ years, the firm officially became “Damon, Shigekane, Key & Char.”

That firm eventually became Damon Key Leong Kupchak Hastert and we are celebrating our 60th anniversary. We have grown to 28 full time attorneys, including another Oregon State alumni. Our attorneys handle many real estate and estate planning transactions and are seen in every court in Hawaii handling construction, real estate, and commercial disputes. All under the steady and watchful eye of Denis.

Denis stayed active with our firm until 2008 when he started to transition to retirement. During that time, he handled real estate and loan transactions, foreclosures, and was our managing partner for many years. He mentored dozens of attorneys and navigated the boom and bust cycle of Hawaii’s economy.

What made Denis so integral to the firm’s operation? Perhaps it was how he viewed the world. Earlier this story revealed that as Denis’ outlook matured, he began experiencing the larger world through his observations of family interactions, summer employment opportunities, competition in school, being away from home, first in Oregon, then in DC and in the Army Reserve and finally in the practice of law itself in Government and private practice. Denis found that all the world really is a stage and we are its actors. He was a keen observer and formed a world view regarding what works best, with the help of a longer perspective. He learned that our world, as he perceived it, is really all about people and how to maximize their interactions.

Denis' guiding principles in his own words:

“[M]y general philosophy is “If you treat everyone fairly- that’s of course subjective- respect everybody, then it works.”

“Some people have more abilities than others, have more qualities that they bring, but put us together and we are all raised, as a group, to the highest level. We wanted to retain a team, a true partnership emotionally, whereby everybody is supporting each other and no one is getting ready to run. If anything, we are getting ready to run to help the next person.”

“That was kind of what I was trying to do. If someone gets out on the edge somewhere, you pull them back. Don’t let that one go to the dogs. No one is like: ‘Wait a second, we are going out there to some extent, but there is a limit.’ We never hit the limit. Presumably there is a limit for everyone, but we never saw it.”

When asked if he had any regrets or might have done something differently, Denis replied, much as Damon Key’s Charlie Bocken had before him: “No, I don’t. Like I mentioned, I felt that the firm is one of collegiality, fairness and being supportive of each other, especially in crisis. I think that we have always done that. Those are the type of things that I have felt, in the past, have held us together. That is what I always try to emphasize.”

“Charlie Bocken captured it well in answer to the question: ‘Have you been treated fairly? What would you change?’ He said, ‘Nothing. I wouldn’t change a thing. I’ve been treated fairly and I am honored to be part of this group. No, I owe you guys. You don’t owe me anything.’”

To me, Denis enabled us to be our very best selves while teaching us to be a team.

Thanks Denis, we will truly miss you.

Dear Denis:

Thank you for being my mentor at work and at life. Thank you for giving me stink eye when I interviewed so I would be fearful of you for a little while but get to know how gentle and kind you really were watching out for each and every one of us associates. Thank you for walking around the office after 5:00pm and teaching us how to conserve energy (turn off lights) but getting us good parking spots so we didn’t have to walk far - late at night. Thank you for standing in line with me to eat “pho” in Chinatown and shopping with me and Anna for jewelry. Thank you for checking out my husband and making a nice speech at our wedding; for travelling with us on many trips as family – all the way from the Keys in Florida to the onsens in Kyushu. Thank you for teaching me to be strong and not to be afraid; to help those that I can; to share the joy and protect the meek; and to work as a team. Thank you always for listening to me complain; guiding me to be a better person, a better lawyer, a better golfer, a better Waialae member...I will miss you plenty but you are always in my heart – until we meet again please watch over us with or without your stink eye.

Love, CHRISTINE KUBOTA

Denis' spirit of helpfulness, generosity and consideration was among that which kept the firm together...

In Honor of Denis Leong

Our firm was known as Damon Shigekane Key & Char in 1977; I was its first summer associate. Denis Leong was one of the partners I met on arrival. I was pretty nervous, and he didn't do a lot to put me at ease.

However, it was a ruse. Within days, he figured out we lived about 2 blocks apart and had kids in the same summer school and sports programs. He then began the first of countless acts of kindness that helped me through those difficult, starting years. He knew having a young family, finishing law school, and working wasn't a cake walk. He was never really sympathetic; rather, he'd casually ask if our girls needed a lift to sports; he'd remember there was something after hours at school and offer to pick them up. Often I was in the office very late, and he would appear. I began to know it was just to make sure I knew I wasn't alone. One night in a bit of a crisis we tried to learn to use the newly invented fax machine together and woke up some poor women in Utah. It seemed he was always there when I needed him, not the least on the day he arrived with a most beautiful bouquet of sunflowers.

Time fools us, and amazingly more than forty years have slipped by with a series of often small, always generous, caring acts by Denis that sustained me and everyone else in the Damon Key family.

And, his absolute loyalty and devotion to clients reflected exactly the same steadfastness. Everyone knew they could depend on Denis. Most don't know the lengths he went to protect them, not just with excellent legal advice.

For example, in 1992, Hurricane Iniki was headed to the islands, and Oahu looked like a target. There had been a fire in another law firm shortly before, and some client files had ended up on Bishop Street. Denis didn't want that to happen to our clients.

It was still dark when Denis called me the morning Iniki was to hit. "We have to do something." "Okay." "I'll pick you up at the bottom of your driveway in 5." "Okay." We went to office and removed every client file/document and every computer from every perimeter office. We taped all the windows, only later learning such is useless. We locked every door. We went home to wait.

Iniki didn't hit downtown Oahu, and the next day we got up early to go put it all back. I don't know of anyone but Denis who would have thought to do all that. I'm betting no other law firm protected its clients that day the way Denis did ours.

Kindness and character are more than behavior. Denis' spirit of helpfulness, generosity and consideration was among that which kept the firm together, strong through all the topsy turvy moments every organization enjoys and suffers. His courage kept us powerful. I'm grateful to have shared a professional lifetime with him. There is a special heavenly sunflower keeping him company.



By DIANE D. HASTERT

Denis C.H. Leong

01/22/42 - 02/22/23

On February 22, 2023 Denis left us to continue on with his journey. We lost a man who was the helmsman of this ship we call a law firm. He was a man who guided us through both calm and troubled waters. Denis was a man whose character, intellect, and leadership benefitted every individual in this firm; even those that joined us after he decided it was time to turn over leadership in 2006.

For Ken and Diane and those that were senior to them, Denis was responsible for shepherding a small firm of individuals into what we are today. We assimilated new lawyers – Charles Key, Clinton Ching and William Shannon. A new administrative structure, compensation system and committees were implemented, which were integral to the development of a firm, not just a partnership of diverse individuals sharing space. He was instrumental in developing several underlying firm concepts that continue to this day. Concepts such as this firm is not “my” firm, it is “our” firm. Everybody is in this endeavor, and we watch out for each other. We run into a problem, we work it out together. Sometimes the light flickers on these concepts, but thankfully so far the light recovers its brightness.

During his tenure, Denis led us and kept us together through two of the most disruptive events that occurred in our firm’s history. First, with Diane’s and our then firm administrator’s assistance he planned and implemented the firm’s move to our present venue. Imagine having to design our space, organize and move all the files, furniture fixtures, equipment, and people. The second, being the departure of a segment of our firm despite having long-standing relationships with those remaining. A little known anecdote regarding Denis and this group’s departure bears mentioning and is an indication of Denis’ character. A senior member of the departing group asked Denis to join them, and he declined. He chose to stay with us even though the person asking him was a friend and someone he respected. He could not abandon his professional family. I think he knew how devastating his leaving would be. Following these events, the firm thrived and grew under his continued leadership.

The next group of attorneys – myself, Christine, Doug, David, Anna, and Greg also benefitted from his guidance and mentorship. We learned to become lawyers. You did the best you could for the client, you fought hard but always with fairness and courtesy, and you did so without being “pilau” (a Hawaiian word for “dirty” but whose true meaning is lost in the English translation). We also learned that we did not need clocks or watches. You came in before the sun came up, and you left after the sun went down. Whatever necessary to get the job done. Hopefully these traits have been passed down to those that have followed.

In addition, all have benefitted from the administrative structure, policies and systems that were implemented during his tenure. He was able to get bright diverse individuals, all with differing views as to how this place should be managed to work together for the benefit of the group. He also dealt with our paralegals and staff with patience, fairness and empathy. There were always two sides to a story, and he would get to the merits of any issue that arouse and resolved it.

Finally, words cannot give you the full measure of the man we lost on February 22nd. To each of us, he was so many things. Many of us have our Denis stories. There are too many to describe here. Ask Diane to tell you about her sunflower, Ken playing softball at Cartwright field, and Christine playing golf. To me, he was my mentor, friend, confidant, and someone I would trust no matter what. Very few make it to this list. He continued to provide guidance and mentorship to me until he could not physically do so.

One of my greatest fears regarding this firm is that the passage of time will cause his legacy to fade and those remaining with this place will forget how we got here and the role he played. Denis’ passing is an opportunity to renew our commitment to this firm and to each other to work hard for our clients, value our individual and collective strengths, to look out for one another, and to work things out with patience and empathy.

Aloha Denis, rest in peace, thank you for everything, hope to see you again, and please keep a place open for me.

By MICHAEL A. YOSHIDA

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the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Center in Seattle, Washington.