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Cover Story

## How Christine Camp develops big dreams

**The Hawaii developer talks with PBN about lessons learned from a life as a self-starter**

When Christine Camp arrived in Hawaii from South Korea with her family in 1976, she was 10 years old and did not speak a word of English.

Her father died a few months later, leaving her mother to raise five children on her own.

“She was working three jobs to make ends meet,” Camp told Pacific Business News in a recent one-on-one interview at her fifth-floor office overlooking Honolulu Harbor. “The kids learned to be independent, and I think that’s the biggest trait that I have.

“From a very young age, I had to work, be independent and responsible for myself and others, and we always dreamed of big things.”

For Camp, dreaming of big things quickly became reality; she allowed nothing to get in her way.

From graduating high school a year early at Kalani High in East Oahu, to working her way up the ladder in the male-dominated development industry at such prominent companies as Castle & Cooke Hawaii Inc. and A&B Properties Inc. while still in college, Camp always found a way to achieve success.

“When Christine joined A&B Properties in 1995, she was one of the few females in the real estate development business,” Stanley Kuriyama, former president and CEO of Alexander & Baldwin Inc., parent of A&B Properties, who is now retired, told PBN. “There are, of course, many women in real estate sales and leasing, but back then, and to a large extent still true today, the development side of the business consisted mostly of men. But during just the first couple years at A&B Properties, Christine clearly proved that she was not only as competent as any male, but could in fact shine in the business.”

Today, Camp, 49, is in her 17th year as the head of her own successful development firm, Avalon Development Co. The Honolulu-based boutique employs more than 30 people and is one of the most active of its kind in the state, especially in Kapolei.



TINA YUEN PBN

Christine Camp, President and CEO of Avalon Development Co.

Camp also is in demand among nonprofit organizations, who see her as an ideal champion for their missions.

"I still have a lot to do," Camp said. "I want people to believe in me. I was a young, scrappy kid trying to get attention from my mom. I was always the young sister that had to prove to my older sisters that I was good enough to sit at their table. When I started my career, I lacked education and background.

"All I wanted people to do was give me a chance. That became a habit and it stuck with me."

### **Early role model**

In her early years growing up in Kaimuki, Camp found a role model for business in her mother.

"My mom tried different businesses, and when she failed, she never gave up," she said. "So a woman raising five children, as I was seeing that, I thought 'I could do this.' She wasn't speaking very much English, raising these kids and I saw that. It made me stronger and made me realize no matter how bad things are, you keep at it. Something better will come along, and that's been my philosophy in life. I've never been fearful of trying new things or doing things differently."

Over time, these lessons are really what has helped Camp through life and in business.

"Nothing is perfect, but when you take up an attitude that things will always get better, if you keep trying, it does get better," she said. "That's my life in a nutshell. Lot of hard work, nothing came easy because of lack of resources and exposure. I kept trying. Whenever I had the opportunity to do something, like babysit, I would be the best at it and say if you need me again, then ask me."

At age 12, Camp started her first business — babysitting. She posted little hand-written cards at laundromats and grocery stores such as Star Markets and Times Supermarkets, offering her babysitting services.

Her rate was \$1 per hour for each child; sometimes she would babysit up to five kids at a time, making \$5 an hour when minimum wage at that time was just \$2.80 an hour.

"I was doing really well when I was 12 years old," Camp said.

### **Lessons of running away from home**

A few years later, at 15, she would make one of the riskiest decisions of her life by deciding one day to run away from home.

"I was tired of working and not being appreciated," Camp said. "I was an 'A' student. I was a cheerleader at Kalani. I was class president and I felt my mom didn't appreciate those things. I would come home from school, and she would tell me to get to work."

She rented an apartment in Kaimuki for \$175 a month and worked numerous odd jobs at Liberty House, Sears and Zippy's.

"I couldn't afford food or a bus fare," Camp said. "I bought a bag of potatoes and boiled it with soy sauce. I was living in an old Chinese school house with eight illegal structures near a sewer. I had no hot water. I had to boil the water. There was a prostitute in that complex who had kids running around the whole time. I

would watch her kids. Another woman was on a pension and had five cats. She would run out of money and eat cat food. A guy was dying of cancer next door.”

But it was a group of college students who gave her inspiration for a better life.

“They were so hopeful, educated and spoke so well, and I said, ‘I need to go to college, this is not how I want to live. I want to have a future,’” Camp said. “I graduated in my junior year. I was really smart in school, and I had enough credits to graduate early.”

With the costs of college staring her in the face, Camp decided it was time to go back home. To her surprise, her mom took her in with open arms.

“She knew I was coming home and prepared a room for me,” Camp said.

### **College and the real world – simultaneously**

After attending at Kapiolani Community College, she transferred to the University of Hawaii Manoa, and at the same time, would get her first foray into the world of real estate development at Rex Kuwasaki’s RK Development.

Camp, an accounting major, started out as a bookkeeper and fell into the role of “girl Friday,” handling anything the boss needed her to do.

“I loved the work,” she said. “He would go home and I’d work till seven or eight at night. Sometimes I would come in during the weekends. I would read files for the sake of reading files, and I found it very interesting reading about subdivisions.”

She would end up working for Kuwasaki for five years, starting at age 17, but telling him she was 20.

“By the time I left his company, I developed a 35-unit project,” Camp said.

### **Impressing big developers**

Around that time, she ran for Miss Korea Hawaii, because her grandmother asked her to. It would turn out to be a good decision.

One of the judges at the pageant was Kathy Inouye, who worked for Castle & Cooke at that time.

“One of the questions they asked was what I wanted to be and I told them I wanted to be a developer, because it affects people’s lives and land is precious in Hawaii,” Camp said. “Kathy was just getting hired at Castle & Cooke and when she realized they were looking for another person, she called me and asked me to apply. That was my link to Castle & Cooke.”

Inouye, one of the few prominent women in Hawaii’s development industry, is now chief operating officer for Kobayashi Group. She remembers Camp as being one of the hardest workers she has ever worked with.

“When Castle & Cooke would have annual reviews, the review was good all around except for one thing: my team works too hard,” Inouye told PBN. “They cited Christine as one of the people working way too long. She would work late into the night and early in the morning. I remember when she came to work one day, she was so tired that she had two different shoes on.”

Harry Saunders, president of Castle & Cooke Hawaii, also worked closely with Camp — he on the sales and marketing side and she on the project management side.

“She really didn’t know much about sales, but she would open up and ask questions and wasn’t afraid to express her opinions,” he told PBN. “I know she was young and I barked at her a few times. I think I hurt her feelings, but she came back the next day. She’s tough and gutsy. It shows that the immigrants to America can pick themselves up, having that desire and hard work ethic to succeed. It really defines how great America is. She came here and has made it happen.”

At Castle & Cooke, Camp learned about focused, long-term residential developments on Oahu.

“That’s where I really learned about the impacts developments had on communities,” she said.

After five years at Castle & Cooke, Camp moved over to A&B after the Honolulu company reached out to her for an interview.

“It was a lateral move, from project manager to project manager,” she said. “I wanted to get involved in marketing, commercial development and doing developments across the state. But they originally thought I was too young at 26 years old. They also had a history of hiring people from Ivy League schools. I was an outlier.”

A&B would eventually make the right decision by hiring her.

“She had all the characteristics that make for an exemplary employee: intelligent, hard working, logical, practical,” Kuriyama said. “But she distinguished herself from the rest by a number of other special qualities. One of those qualities, and something that’s almost impossible to teach, is creativity, the ability to think outside the box. Christine had the ability to identify innovative approaches to whatever task she was given.

“She didn’t stop with the obvious or standard answers, not what the market has wanted, but what the market will want,” he said. “Sometimes, things that the market doesn’t even realize it wants, until it’s delivered.”

A good example is one of the first investments A&B Properties made when it initiated its effort of investing in real estate outside of its core landholdings.

“Christine uncovered a parcel adjacent to a long-closed sugar mill, and which was now surrounded by both residential and industrial uses,” Kuriyama said. “But rather identifying the uses most people would have come up with — most likely residential, or possibly light industrial — she came up with the idea of subdividing this abandoned property into smaller lots, to be sold to small business users who would want to own their own property in fee simple. Given the rural, out-of-the-way location of the property, this was a concept that met a market need most people would not have considered, and it proved to be a successful project and investment for A&B.”

### **Stepping out on her own — again — and becoming a mom**

After about five years at A&B, Camp felt the need to step out and develop properties on her own. That was 17 years ago, when she created Avalon Development.

Several years later, the Great Recession hit, just as she was about to become a single mom to her son, Ethan, who currently attends Punahou School.

"I wanted to be a mom," Camp said. "I wanted to experience that. My mom was wonderful. I felt I could be a good single mom. I felt life wouldn't be full unless you experience being a parent."

When her son was born, she contemplated taking three years off. But it was 2008 and her firm was starting to suffer the effects of the start of the Great Recession.

"My loans were getting called and I had to cancel some projects," Camp said. "We walked away from \$2 million to \$3 million. There I was a mom to a newborn, and I had to come back to work to claw out of the business mess that all developers were in."

The experience made her better and her company stronger. In addition to being a developer and investor, Avalon Development also provides services in wireless antenna site acquisition and development, real estate consulting and advising, and real estate brokerage and property management, with more than 1,000 apartment rental units that it manages. It also recently completed the 7000 Hawaii Kai rental housing project in East Oahu.

"We just finished our third five-year goal at Avalon," Camp said. "The first five-year goal was to finish a nine-unit cluster project. I also bought two properties on Maui. Our second five-year goal was to develop ground-up projects and our third five-year goal was setting up an operating company that provides cash flow. My goal for this five-year cycle is doing \$50 million to \$100 million projects. After that, it's letting the next set of leaders take over."

### **Passion for Oahu's Second City**

Few in Hawaii can match the passion and vision that Camp has for Oahu's so-called "Second City" of Kapolei.

"I want to build Kapolei as a vibrant place to live and work," she said. "The public purpose of a second city has been lost. What if the city's Department of Planning and Permitting moved to Kapolei? I would love to see the University of Hawaii West Oahu become a vibrant university. If I can see that in the next 10 years, I would love it. I was there when they first broke ground on the first road in Kapolei in 1986."

Since that time, Avalon Development has invested heavily in the area, most recently with the purchases of the 123-acre Kapolei Business Park and the 54-acre Kapolei Business Park 2, along with Walton Street Capital, in 2014.

In both cases, the properties are developed as for-sale fee-simple lots.

"My first job at Castle & Cooke was to oversee the Villages of Kapolei project," Camp said. "It was homes in the middle of cane fields. Every month I go out there to Kapolei, it looks different. I have an obligation, a long-term vision for the area that will only come alive when we spend our time and money investing in the area."

### **Giving back is personal**

Growing up with very little has given Camp an appreciation for nonprofits and the work that each one does.

At one time, she was serving on 17 nonprofit boards and admits that she has a hard time turning them down.

"I can't say 'no,'" she said. "I come from having needs."

Camp currently serves on the boards for the YMCA of Honolulu, Blue Planet Foundation, Diamond Head Theatre and Central Pacific Bank.

“She was a great supporter of the bank to assist in our turnaround,” John Dean, former CEO and current executive chairman of Central Pacific Bank, told PBN. “I found her always involved and fully engaged with what the bank is doing. A lot of people who sit on boards, few are involved as she is.”

Camp’s also the co-chair of the American Heart Association’s Heart Ball in Hawaii next year. This role has taken on a special meaning for her, as her 46-year-old brother recently died from a heart attack.

“I have this passion about education for heart disease and lifestyle choice,” Camp said. “I was very involved with Child & Family Services, which has a waiting list to be on its board. Child & Family Service is about being the basic safety net for kids who come from bad backgrounds.”

Howard Garval, president and CEO of Child & Family Service, said she brings a strong financial background to the table as a board member.

“We did a merger and acquisition a while back and her business background was valuable,” he told PBN. “She actively participated in the merger discussion with this for-profit company. It was a successful merger.”

Serving on the YMCA board also a special connection to her. Camp remembers learning how to swim at the YMCA after she almost drowned one day.

Having arts and culture in the community are also important to her. That’s why she once served on the board of the Hawaii Opera Theatre and is currently on the board of Diamond Head Theatre.

“When she helps us, she does it in a very focused manner,” Deena Dray, executive director of Diamond Head Theatre, told PBN. “She’s committed to the community and nonprofit work. She carves out time and gets directly at the heart of what she’s needed to do.”

When Diamond Head Theatre was negotiating to select an architect for its new buildings, Camp was part of the process.

“That was invaluable,” Dray said. “That was key. She was able to help us get through that first design.”

Camp also sits on the board of Blue Planet Foundation, a renewable energy focused nonprofit, because it’s really about her son’s future.

“It’s one thing to be successful, but what do you leave for your children?” she asked.

For Camp, a lover of all fairy tales, her own happy ending is getting closer and closer to coming to fruition.

“You can’t live your life without the dream of having a happy ending,” she said. “And I believe that. I want other people to have that too.”

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## **Christine Camp**

President and CEO of Avalon Development Co.

**Age:** 49

**Born in:** South Korea, family immigrated to Hawaii in 1976

**First job:** Babysitting at 12 years old

**Boards then and now:** YMCA of Honolulu, Chamber of Commerce Hawaii, Hawaii Opera Theater, Diamond Head Theatre, Blue Planet Foundation, Central Pacific Bank, Child & Family Service.

**Loves:** Fairy tales and the Harry Potter book series

### **Avalon Development's major projects**

Late last year, purchased a 4,100-square-foot commercial condominium in Downtown Honolulu for company's new headquarters.

**Kapolei Business Park:** In 2014, Avalon Development and Walton Street Capital formed a joint venture to buy the 123-acre business park in West Oahu, with a plan to put the 47 fee-simple industrial lots and another 23-acre lot on the market.

**Kapolei Business Park Phase 2:** In 2014, Avalon Development purchased the 54-acre business park and put the fee-simple industrial lots on the market, ranging in size from 1 acre to about 5 acres. Investments in Kapolei Business Park 2 will total \$110 million. Eleven of the 17 completed lots of the 34-acre phase 2A have been sold.

**7000 Hawaii Kai Drive:** \$165 million 269-unit rental project recently completed in East Oahu

**Plaza at Milltown:** 40,000-square-foot building. New tenants include Hawaii Technology Academy and Ballet Hawaii. Existing tenants include Na Maka, a kindergarten prep school; Liberty Dialysis; Pearl's Chinese Kitchen; Studio 6 Spa and Salon; and 808 Urban Bowl.

**Kapolei Pacific Center:** Plans still in the works for office and medical office buildings in Kapolei as part of the 3-acre Kapolei Pacific Center near Kapolei Regional Park. It already includes the developer's \$8 million Social Security Administration building and 13,600-square-foot Cole Academy, a learning center and preschool for young children.

**Duane Shimogawa**

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