



Wednesday, August 24, 2022 | Today's Paper | 85°

HAWAII NEWS | LEE CATALUNA

Air carrier's alumni keep pride aloft years later

By [Lee Cataluna](#) • April 7, 2017

The company they worked for has been gone for 26 years, and some of them retired long before that, but they still get together regularly to reminisce about the jobs that took them around the world.

The board of directors of the Pan Am Association Aloha Chapter meets every month. Every other month is a luncheon for all members. There are currently 276 former Pan Am employees in the Hawaii association. Last year there were 315. "We're losing people because of age," Darlene Laster, chapter president, said.

Their stories could fill a book — probably many books — of a time when air travel was an elegant affair and esprit de corps was part of the airline's culture.

Eva Kama was a Pan Am stewardess during 1964-1986, before the job was called "flight attendant."

"The standards were extremely strict," Kama said. Stewardesses had to have two years of work experience or a college degree and speak a second language as well as English. All had to be at least 5 feet 2 inches tall to reach the equipment. There were regular weight checks monitored by a grooming supervisor. Their hair had to clear their collars or be worn pinned up; they had to wear red nail polish and red lipstick; they wore white gloves in the summer, black gloves in winter, and always a girdle.

"The service we had was bar-none. You can't even imagine. Breakfast was eggs-to-order cooked on the plane. There were multiple courses, a cheese and fruit cart, a dessert cart with cherries jubilee and peaches with brandy," Kama said.

Al Chun worked for Pan Am from 1957 until 1984. He is proud that he became director of passenger sales — the first Asian-American in the company to do so.

Chun's time with the airline includes a story of romance. He married a woman who worked on the team that he supervised, which was against company policy. They kept their marriage secret, listing Chun's mother's house as his residence. When after-hours work phone calls came for him, Chun's mother would make an excuse for why he couldn't come to the phone, and then call him at his apartment to tell him to call in to work.

"After about a year my mom said it was time to come clean," Chun said. He ended up being transferred into another department but continued on, happy in his job. After retirement he found himself lonely for the company. "Pan Am. That's my life," Chun said.

Ellen Shikuma grew up in Kaimuki up the street from Queen Theater. She went to college at New York University and, by chance, landed a job interview at Pan Am in the famous headquarters building above Grand Central Station. During the interview she realized she wasn't going to be hired, so she took a bold step, saying, "You're about to open a Japan route. You don't have anyone at your counter who looks like me." She started with the airline that day.

Shikuma worked while attending college, earned a master's degree in education and rose in position within the airline's training department. "From the mid-1960s to 1970s, I never was at a meeting, even with other airlines, where there was another woman at the table," Shikuma said. She worked for Pan Am during 1954-1991.

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Carol Suyderhoud grew up in Queens, N.Y. As a child she'd go to La Guardia Airport with her father to watch the planes come and go. She worked for Pan Am from 1969 until 1989, and one of her dearest memories was getting her father a seat on the new 747 aircraft when it debuted in 1970. Instead of watching the huge new plane take off, he was thrilled to actually be a passenger.

The Pan Am era ended, as did the grace and cachet of air travel, but the stories go on. Each member of the group could write a memoir.

"My father was making \$5 a week when I was born," Laster said. "For somebody like me to travel around the world, it was really great. When you told people you worked for Pan Am, it really meant something."

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