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Former tech exec pivots to lead Hawaii Restaurant Association amid industry crises



Sheryl Matsuoka

TRACY WRIGHT CORVO



By **True Deck** – Reporter, Pacific Business News
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Story Highlights

- Sheryl Matsuoka leads recovery efforts for the Hawaii Restaurant Association.
- The 2023 Lahaina wildfires destroyed more than 70 local restaurants.
- The association trains nearly 2,000 students through its ProStart curriculum.

Sheryl Matsuoka serves as the president and CEO of the Hawaii Restaurant Association, leading advocacy, education and workforce development for the state's food service and dining industry.

Before stepping into association management, Matsuoka spent 30 years in the office equipment industry, specifically as vice president of technical support at Toshiba Hawaii.

Rooted in a family of multigenerational restaurateurs, she has steered Hawaii's restaurant sector through pandemic shutdowns, severe storm recovery and the aftermath of the 2023 Lahaina wildfires.

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What sparked your decision to join Hawaii Restaurant Association after a 30-year career in technology?

I left Toshiba after three decades, where I was the only female vice president of technical support in a heavily male-dominated industry. That experience taught me how to communicate across all levels, departments and leadership backgrounds. When the [HRA](#) board approached me, they specifically needed someone who understood association management, legislative advocacy and member value but also understood operational realities of restaurants. My husband is a third-generation restaurateur, and our family has run restaurants here for years. The board felt I brought both sides of the coin: a deep understanding of vendors, food service logistics and local operators, combined with executive corporate structure.

How does leading the Hawaii Restaurant Association compare to your time at Toshiba?

The transition was surprisingly seamless. Both sectors are fundamentally service-oriented, but the restaurant community is deeply personal. Having owned restaurants with my husband, I already knew the local suppliers, whether it was broadline food distributors, takeout packaging vendors or beverage companies. The demographics aren't entirely different, either. Like tech, restaurant ownership and executive leadership remain heavily male-dominated. A major goal of mine is seeing more women own and operate dining establishments across the Islands.

Between the pandemic, the Lahaina wildfires and recent severe storms, what has been the greatest challenge facing Hawaii operators?

Each crisis brought its own devastation, but Lahaina was by far the worst. During COVID-19, restaurants faced shutdowns and restrictions, but operators could pivot to mobile apps and takeout models to stay alive. In Lahaina, more than 70 restaurants vanished overnight. Workers lost their homes and their livelihoods simultaneously. Whether it is responding to wildfires or coordinating logistics when storms knock out power and roads on Kauai, the challenge is maintaining real-time communication across every island. Our board members and local operators act as boots on the ground, helping us assess damages and direct recovery sources where they are needed most.

How is the association addressing long-term workforce shortages in Hawaii's culinary sector?

Workforce development has to start early. Through the Hawaii Restaurant Association Education Foundation, we run the ProStart culinary curriculum in 13 local high schools across Oahu, Maui and Hawaii Island. We currently have nearly 2,000 students enrolled. These programs expose sophomores, juniors and seniors to professional food preparation, kitchen operations and sanitation. When high schoolers participate in major industry events like our Hall of Fame Gala – prepping plating alongside top chefs for hundreds of guests – they see firsthand that food service extends far beyond cooking.

About Sheryl Matsuoka

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