On Jan. 9, Hawai‘i Lodging & Tourism Association will host its 30th Annual Na Po‘e Pa‘ahana Awards at Hilton Hawaiian Village. This event is one of my personal favorites, as we get the opportunity to recognize the outstanding hotel and lodging employees whose hard work, professionalism and embodiment of the aloha spirit make visiting our state a memorable experience. The luncheon has the feel of a gigantic pep rally as co-workers gather from throughout the state to cheer and applaud their favorite honorees.

Each year, HLTA receives nominations for hundreds of individuals who have been selected by their respective hotel organizations for this coveted recognition. From this pool, our volunteer panel of judges sorts through the stacks of submissions and whittles down the group until only the finalists remain. Winners are selected for small-, medium- and large-sized lodging properties in the following categories: Bell/Valet Person of the Year; Housekeeper of the Year; Security Officer of the Year; Front Desk Person of the Year; Food & Beverage Person of the Year; and Engineer & Maintenance Person of the Year.

We also award the Manager of the Year and Outstanding Lodging Employee of the Year awards to single winners, regardless of property size. In addition to these categories, HLTA also presents a variety of other special awards to businesses, organizations and individuals in recognition of their contributions to the state’s No. 1 industry. This year, we will again award the following: Allied Member of the Year; Allied Individual of the Year; Chef/Restaurateur of the Year; Excellence in Community Service Award; Leader in Sustainability Award; Hospitality Educator of the Year; Pūlamahia Award; Woman of the Year Award; Na Po‘e Pa‘ahana Legacy Award; and the newly established Ho‘oka‘omaha‘o Award.

There has been a renewed push for the entire hospitality industry to go to greater lengths to honor and perpetuate our Native Hawaiian culture in a fashion that is both accurate and culturally sensitive. HLTA chairman Michael Jokovich has made this a priority for his term, and has asked us to establish an award that would recognize an individual who has consistently worked to grow and enhance the Hawaiian culture.

To name this award and last year’s inaugural Hawaiian culture award to a business, I consulted with kumu hula Michael Pili Pang, HLTA’s cultural practitioner board member. I initiated the individual award last year so that hotel properties that have demonstrated a commitment to preserving and sharing the Hawaiian culture with dignity and grace could be honored.
Last year’s inaugural winner of the Pulamahia Award (to care for and cherish) was Maui’s Ka’ānapali Beach Hotel. Pili Pang recommended the name Ho’okamaha’o, for the individual honor this year, which means to be or do something wonderful, or to take a new, more splendid form.

Finally, please join me in congratulating HAOSkeeping Inc. president Hao Dang Tanac-sos, who has been named 2020 Woman of the Year by HLTA’s Women in Lodging & Tourism committee.

Hao’s story is remarkable. Born and raised in Vietnam, she would try seven times before successfully escaping her home country. Arriving in Hawai’i, Hao spoke no English, but she worked tirelessly to excel in Hawai’i’s tourism industry. Over the course of her career, she has worked in the housekeeping departments of various properties including Mauna Kea Beach Hotel, The Westin Hāpuna, Waikīkī Resort Hotel, Park Shore Waikīkī and Hotel Lāna’i.

Drawing on these experiences, Hao founded her own successful housekeeping training and consulting business, and co-founded and chairs HLTA’s popular Hospitality Housekeeping Council. As Hao’s nominator, United Laundry Services’ president and CEO Vicky Cayetano said, “Ms. Hao has earned a stellar reputation,” for having that ‘special touch’ that enables her to motivate the men and women who comprise housekeeping. I am extremely delighted to see her hard work and meritorious service awarded with her selection as the 2020 Woman of the Year.”

As we usher in a new year, it is of paramount importance for us to celebrate the successes and triumphs of the stars of our industry. The hard-working men and women who are honored each year at the Na Po’e Pa’ahana Awards luncheon are often the unsung heroes who make Hawai’i a special place for visitors and local residents alike.

In closing, we hope that you have been able to enjoy the holiday season with your families and loved ones and best wishes from HLTA for a most prosperous new decade.

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