

VOICES: Maka'i Golf Club's 50th birthday may be its last

By Mary Paterson, Other Voices | Friday, January 29, 2021, 12:05 a.m.

Recently, I volunteered as the Kaua'i North Shore Lions teed off for their annual golf tournament to raise money for scholarships for students in our area.

Scores of community members came together at the Princeville Makai Golf Course, which once again provided the perfect setting. The tournament raised more than \$53,000 — the most in its history.

The legendary 27-hole course, known for sweeping vistas and lush landscape, is more than just a backdrop. It is open space relied on for decades by generations of Garden Island families.

But the tournament was played against an unfortunate backdrop this year. With the luxury camping project proposed by developers Starwood Capital and East-West Partners, the Maka'i courses are now a reminder of the vulnerability of the open spaces that bind our community.

The survival of the golf property — but, really, the soul of Princeville — is at risk. And as Princeville is at risk, so might be all other communities in Hawai'i that rely on golf-adjacent open spaces.

The rolling open greens of the Makai are the hallmark of Princeville. Glamping, as it's called, would create the equivalent of a new, 50-room hotel on what is known as the Woods Course at Makai, and it could signal the end of the verdant setting that serves as the heart and lungs of our community.

As the course celebrates its milestone anniversary, it's a perfect time to reflect on the history of this special place. I recently had the opportunity to talk to renowned golf course architect Robert Trent Jones Jr. about the creation of the course, one of 10 he designed in the state of Hawai'i.

"It's hard to believe that 50 years have passed since this golf-course community first took root," said Jones, who designed the iconic 27-hole layout. "I vividly remember traversing these lands on horseback with Princeville's original engineer, Donn 'Curly' Carswell, when it was still ranch land, and sculpting out the course.

"Seeing the master plan mature into this beautiful community has been especially heartwarming. This place is very special to me, and I'm honored to be here to see it turn 50."

The lore and traditions of Kaua'i permeate the history of Princeville. In the 1800s, this treasured slice of land, then known as Kalihikai, was transformed into a ranch under the reign of Kamehameha III, laying the foundation for the Hawaiian cowboy (paniolo) tradition.

In 1860, King Kamehameha IV, Queen Emma and their young son Albert visited the ranchland, owned by Robert Crichton Wylie, who had been appointed as minister of foreign affairs by Kamehameha III. In tribute to the royal family and their treasured son, Wylie named the verdant land "Princeville."

Ownership of the land changed through the intervening decades, allowing ambitious planters and ranchers an opportunity to sow sugar, coffee and tobacco. However, the enduring legacy of Princeville proved to be cattle. In the 1970s, Carswell and his wife Gale began offering horseback rides from their family ranch at Po'oku Stables, marking the North Shore's first adventure tour.

In 1971, Princeville's story began a new chapter when it became the first master-planned community in Hawai'i. "It was a little scary communicating new ways to old friends," says Carswell, who was selected to serve as the chief engineer of the new development.

"They trusted me because they knew me and my family. We said what we did and we did what we said, but boy was it torture to get through the state and county procedures."

And so, another enduring chapter unfolded, illustrated with a deep-seated reverence for community and a commitment to maintain the North Shore's world-famous vistas and extraordinary beauty — a place where nature and neighborhoods would co-exist harmoniously.

Princeville is uniquely special, where a round of golf is complemented by an afternoon surf session with an old friend or new acquaintance. It's a place where I know my neighbors and their pets by name, and they know me.

If the developers' glamping project goes forward, it could effectively mean the end of the Makai and this important part of our history. It would tear something irreplaceable from the heart of my community.

I and so many of my neighbors hope these plans never materialize.

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