

PHOTO: DAVID CROXFORD



KULIA PACHECO BOERSTLER

SENIOR STRUCTURAL ENGINEER,
BALDRIDGE & ASSOCIATES

AGE: 37

Growing up in Denmark, Claus Hansen never dreamed of owning a mortuary.

His future undertakings began when he and a friend decided to offer a service scattering remains over Hawaii from an airplane.

He promoted the idea at mainland mortician conventions and met others in the industry. A casket exhibitor asked how to get his products to Hawaii. Hansen saw an opportunity and gradually went from casket distributor to retailer. Soon clients asked what else he could do for them, so Moanalua Mortuary was born.

"I analyzed the industry and realized there was a portion of it that was unfulfilled. There was no discount funeral home here and average prices were significantly higher than the national averages," he explains.

Dying isn't cheap, Hansen admits, but he has lower prices because his profit margins are smaller and his business is lean. He also purchased the old Granny Goose warehouse in Mapunapuna for his large inventory of caskets and supplies.

"I'm able to order big quantities and source from the manufacturer, so I don't need to rely on distributors to get me

Kulia Pacheco Boerstler thrives on challenges and won't take "no" for an answer.

That she started training for triathlons the week after being diagnosed with stage 3 colorectal cancer is a testament to her self-described "hard-headedness."

"I was diagnosed on a Thursday and the Great Aloha Run was the following Monday," she recalls about that day two years ago. "My doctor told me if I felt OK, I could run. Since I'd been training, I decided to do it." Ten months later, while undergoing chemoradiation treatments, Boerstler finished her first triathlon, which she had signed up to do as a relay with two co-workers.

"I got to the race and found out they weren't going to do it since one had the flu and the other had a cold," she says. "I thought, 'I signed up for this,' so I did (all three events) by myself."

products," he says.

Hansen became a change agent for the local industry, according to his banker and long-time friend, Paul Lemcke, CEO at NAVFAC Federal Credit Union.

"Claus forced the 14 Oahu funeral homes to re-think their pricing strategy, ultimately creating better choices. From a business standpoint, it's revolutionary when one man can come along and affect an industry that critically," says Lemcke. "But there's more to him than that. He has integrity and intelligence, and he chooses to use it to better our community."

In particular, Hansen has reached out to the Micronesian community, which he says has cultural needs not served by other funeral homes.

"Their funerals are a little different. They like to have all family members and friends come to visit the family of the deceased for several evenings in a row. We're talking about a tight-knit community, so there can be 200 to 600 people coming to visit the family when they live in a small apartment. That can become quite a disturbance for their neighbors, so we help out by offering our facility to them."

Years earlier, that same fighting spirit got her through college against the odds. She had always aspired to become an engineer, had a 3.8 GPA at Kailua High School, but her SAT scores were low. After struggling at UH-Manoa, she enrolled at Honolulu Community College and worked her way into the University of Colorado at Boulder, earning her bachelor's and master's degrees in engineering.

"The moment I left Hawaii, the intention was to come home," she says. "I got a lot of experience working for a company in Denver, but once the work dried out, it made more sense to come back. I wanted my daughter to grow up like I did and be with family." Boerstler landed a job with Baldrige & Associates and returned to the Islands with her husband and toddler.

Her boss, Steve Baldrige, president of Baldrige & Associates, says Boerstler isn't afraid to get her hands dirty.

"We were shorthanded one day in our concrete-testing laboratory and Kulia volunteered to step in and help break concrete test cylinders," says Baldrige. "No job or project is beneath her if it is in the best interests of our clients or the office."

Boerstler continued working and training during cancer treatments, as she didn't want the disease to impact her work.

"Work helps me through and doing things that you enjoy takes the pain away," she says. "Through my treatment, I made sure I kept in contact with clients and co-workers. In the end, it all made me more resilient."

Her projects include the construction administration of the Pacifica Honolulu condominium on Kapiolani Boulevard and serving as project manager for Project Moanalua, an assisted-living facility near Kaiser Moanalua.

"My ultimate goal is to be able to look at the Honolulu skyline and say, 'I had a part in that.'"