

Cover Story

Subscriber Content

Kitty Lagareta is PBN's Women Who Mean Business 2017 Career Achievement Honoree

February 10, 2017, 5:05am HST

[Katie Murar](#) Reporter *Pacific Business News*



Kitty Lagareta poses in front of a mural in Saks Fifth Avenue at International Market... [more](#)

Tina Yuen PBN

[Kitty Lagareta](#) wakes up hours before the sun rises to make it to her 5 a.m. workout. She trains several times a week with [Mike Sapp](#)—a local personal trainer who works with other Hawaii business individuals—at his eponymous gym in Honolulu.

Owning a public relations firm isn't enough for Lagareta. She craves passion for living, for having something more in her life that drives her to get out of bed every morning.

“For the longest time, my kids were what motivated me to go to work every day,” said Lagareta, who had her first son two weeks before she turned 20. “When they both left for college, I needed something to push me to do more, do better, and it took me a year to find my fire again.”

Lagareta filled the gap left by her two sons, both currently living on the Mainland, with volunteer work, and later, fitness.

Lagareta has brought that inner fire to her professional and volunteer work, spearheading change in some of Hawaii's largest philanthropic organizations, including the Ronald McDonald House, the Kapiolani Health Foundation and the American Red Cross Association, while simultaneously running the show at [Communications Pacific](#).

The two sectors are connected for Lagareta, as her involvement with the Ronald McDonald House as a founding board member and first executive director led to her job with the public relations firm. Although the catalyst for her association with the non-profit was not a positive one, it led to the discovery of her love for solving problems through strategic thinking.

"My youngest son had spinal meningitis, and it changed the course of everything I had planned to do," Lagareta said. She had intended to go to law school when she moved to Hawaii with her husband in her early 20s. "From my time spent at the hospital I noticed that there were Neighbor Island families living in the parking lot because they wanted to be closer to their kids or it was too expensive to stay in a hotel, and that put me on a course to become involved with the Ronald McDonald House."



LAGARETA'S ADVICE FOR BUSINESSWOMEN

Whatever belief it is that got you to do whatever it is you are doing – whatever those ingredients were – don't lose sight of them. When things are tough and it's hard to put one step in front of the other, remember why you started."

[Veronica Kaneko](#), president and managing director of McDonald's Restaurants of Hawaii, referred to her friend and colleague as a natural leader.

"She was both a businesswoman and a young mother, and I knew she had a passion for the cause," Kaneko said. "I recall being at events where she was the speaker, and I was impressed at the way she spoke comfortably and knowledgeably to McDonald's executives and franchisees. She was a role model for women in the audience and I don't think she even realized it."

As the organization worked to gain footing in the community, it hired [Communications Pacific](#) for representation, and Lagareta, the only employee, worked hands on with the company and the media.

"The concept was controversial at the time, so McDonalds wisely hired a PR firm. I was in my late 20s and knew nothing about dealing with the media and was scared to death, but [Ronald McDonald House's] president, [Susan Entz](#), lived in Kona so I was the only person to do it," Lagareta said.

When the house, located in Manoa Valley, opened in 1987, Communications Pacific offered Lagareta a job as a junior account executive. Her first task? To help her client, Dr. [Richard Kelley](#), then chairman of [Outrigger Enterprises](#), bring a convention center to Hawaii.

"I had been in the hotel business for about 10 years when I first met Kitty," Kelley said. "The task to bring a convention center to Hawaii was a 15-year-campaign, and she proved day by day to be the best person for the job. She is hard-working and has a wonderful way of connecting and communicating with people."

This relationship gave Lagareta an ‘aha’ moment of sorts, and she could start to see the job as a life-long career.

“Dr. Kelley had vision,” Lagareta said. “I knew it was a big task and I was going to be able to do something really huge, and it thrilled me. After it was a success, I thought, okay maybe I can do this for the rest of my life.”

Everything about Lagareta is colorful. From her style, to her personality, and often — her language.

According to Kaneko, “what you see is what you get.”

“Unique is a fitting word to describe Kitty,” Kaneko said. “Her style, her attitude, and her outlook are all unique and quite refreshing. She is so much fun and there is never a dull moment with her.”

[Bettina Mehnert](#), president and CEO of AHL, Architects Hawaii Ltd., one of Lagareta’s clients, was immediately drawn to Lagareta’s warmth and sense of humor when they met 20 years ago.

“Kitty has a down-to-earth style and connects to people,” said Mehnert. “Even way back then it struck me how seemingly effortlessly she stood her ground — something I admire today.”

Lagareta’s drive and resilience fits seamlessly with her line of work.

“It’s a lot of writing and strategic thinking, and problem solving,” Lagareta said of her profession. “We help clients look at their business plan and examine the ways in which we can help move them forward and achieve their goals.”

Lagareta quickly moved up within the company, becoming chief executive officer in 1996, just 10 years after she started.

She then decided to buy the company from Hill+Knowlton Strategies, and owned the business by 1998.

“Kitty is never afraid to stand tough, and one telling time was when she decided to buy Communications Pacific — she essentially saved the company,” Kelley said.

“It was a very scary thing to do, and yet I wanted to do it,” Lagareta said. “I called a number of businesswomen in the community, and they were honest and thoughtful and so generous with their time. They helped me navigate the process because at the time there was still discrimination in getting financing and it was harder for women.”

Lagareta speaks openly about her passion for gender equality, though felt pressured at one point to choose between paths.

“Everything was sped up for me. I met my first husband, a local boy, in college in California, and I dropped out to take care of our son so he could work,” Lagareta said. “Everything was swirling around back in the early ’70s about women’s rights and equal pay and the freedom to make choices, and it was really important to me because I saw myself going down this career path — and then suddenly I was on the mom path. I loved it, but didn’t know if I was able to do both.”



LAGARETA'S ADVICE FOR BUSINESSWOMEN

Ask for help. It's hard to do, but it is crucial to ask for support. When you do, it's amazing how many people will be there to help you along the way."

Lagareta returned to school to get a degree from the University of Hawaii in literature, and her first job in Hawaii was at the YWCA working on the International Women's Year Conference in Honolulu, where she met fellow businesswomen involved in the movement.

"We were constantly marching for women's rights," Lagareta said. "And everything we marched for is at risk now, so I have been throwing myself into that again."

Lagareta shows her support for the movement in the form of mentoring as well, frequently speaking to large groups of women about navigating the business world. A common topic she explores is fear.

"When I was named PBN's first businesswoman of the year in 1999, I devoted a whole speech to fear," Lagareta said. "I tell women it is not bad to be afraid but don't look at it as something that stops you, look at it as something to motivate you, to make you stop and ask a few questions. Also, I had realized that when I am fearful I have adrenaline and that is pretty good rocket fuel when you want to get stuff done, so use it."

Two things that helped Lagareta overcome fear was entering into motherhood at a young age and accidentally becoming a part of Rap Reiplinger's comedy troupe.

She auditioned for the improvisation group as an extra-credit assignment for one of her classes at the University of Hawaii, and impressed Reiplinger, securing a spot.

"The prompt for the audition was just to talk for five minutes....I don't even know what I said," Lagareta said. "It was terrifying and exhilarating, and I learned that if you can just jump over your fear, there are some pretty great things you can do on the other side."

"Kitty is a role model in that she shows all of us that humor, passion, backbone and heart are a combination that can be successful," Mehnert said. "I try to remind myself of that occasionally."

When the recession hit in 2008, Lagareta's firm was hit hard, as it was trying to help its clients maintain their businesses while trying to stay afloat themselves.

"The recession walloped my firm," Lagareta said. "The hardest thing I ever had to do in business was laying off employees during that time. We had about 70 employees, we were a good-sized agency, and we had to let go of a lot of them. I know I wasn't the only one who had to do this, but for me it was very personal, and I tried my best to connect them with other jobs."

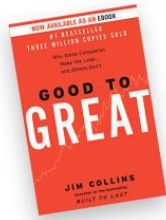
Even during this survival period, Lagareta remained active in the community, devoting her skills to organizations that needed help.

She helped develop the corporate partners program for the American Red Cross, which brought in \$225,000 during its first year and is now raising close to \$1 million annually.

“When I came in I looked at their fundraising, it seemed exhausting to the organization, so we put a committee together,” Lagareta said. “It was about educating the business community about what we need to keep the organization strong and ready to address any disaster. I feel really proud to be a part of something where I can bring what I do to the table, and help something work better.”

Kaneko calls Lagareta the “ultimate role model when it comes to giving back to the community.”

RECOMMENDED READING



“Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap... and Others Don’t,” by Jim Collins

“She gives so much of her personal time and energy to so many by serving on different boards in addition to her generosity,” Kaneko said. “She got involved in politics when it may not have been a popular thing to do, but she is always guided by what she believes is right. We are fortunate to have her passion and concern for our communities and the state of Hawaii.”

Although Lagareta still loves what she does and doesn’t plan on leaving soon, she has considered what lies ahead, and about the next step for her career.

“I have been thinking a lot about this place we all love and call home, and I think we need a larger strategic plan for who we want to be, and how things can work better for everyone,” Lagareta said. “I am tired of watching companies start up or come to Hawaii with the intention of doing something good, and leaving with their tails between their legs.”

Lagareta said the community needs to gather to tackle issues plaguing Hawaii including homelessness, education and rail.

“Nobody has the answer to what our future is and who we are, but there are other places that have figured it out without killing each other. I think we have enough talent, brains and resources to learn how to do things better, and make a lasting difference.”

Early Years

Lagareta was born in California in 1954 to a 16-year-old mother, who raised her in the Mojave Desert. She spent a semester at the University of Riverside for a high school program when she was 16, and was accepted to the school immediately following the summer. She got married at 19 and moved to Hawaii, finishing her degree at the University of Hawaii.

Mentors

Communications Pacific founder Bobbye Hughes McDermott, and Ronald McDonald House founder [Susan Entz](#)

Community Involvement

- Ronald McDonald House
- Kapiolani Health Foundation
- American Red Cross-Hawaii State Chapter
- Aloha Council of the Boy Scouts of America
- Assets School and Enterprise Honolulu
- Diamond Head Theatre
- University of Hawaii Board of Regents
- Hawaii Symphony Orchestra

Katie Murar covers tourism, restaurants, retail and residential real estate for Pacific Business News.



Kitty Lagareta is PBN's 2017... [more](#)

Tina Yuen PBN



Lagareta and her mother,... [more](#)

Tina Yuen PBN