

A Port in the Storm

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It's a tough job as president and CEO of Visitor Aloha Society of Hawai'i, but Jessica Lani Rich relishes her duties as a lifeline for tourists and a ray of light in the local community. PHOTO BY LAWRENCE TABUDLO

Police get the call on a Thursday afternoon: A man with a gun has barricaded himself inside a hotel room in Waikīkī.

Officers begin getting people — many of them visitors — out.

Soon, Jessica Lani Rich's phone starts ringing.

“The police called me and said, ‘Can you help us relocate 90 people?’” says Rich, president and CEO of Visitor Aloha Society of Hawai'i. “I said, ‘Can you give me 10 minutes?’”



Jessica Lani Rich (left) and Visitor Aloha Society of Hawai'i board member Jerry Dolak (right) with visitor Bruce Wiley (center) whose wife died unexpectedly while they were vacationing on Maui. **PHOTO COURTESY VASH**

She phones the head of security at Hilton Hawaiian Village and they make a ballroom available for evacuees. Then, she reaches out to the owner of Charley's Taxi, who sends about 20 cabs. She also calls longtime VASH volunteer Robert Gentry and they stay until the visitors are given the all-clear — at around 2:30 a.m.

Not every situation is this dramatic — and thankfully none of the visitors were hurt — but as a point agency for tourists facing unforeseen adversity, VASH is not unfamiliar with crises. In today’s social-media-saturated world, where a bad experience can go viral, VASH is doing its part to protect Hawai‘i’s reputation.



Jessica Lani Rich (left) and guest Eric Crispin, dean of the Consular Corps of Hawai‘i, on the set of *Inspire You & Me*, a local television show hosted and produced by Rich. **PHOTO COURTESY JESSICA LANI RICH**

Although the Aloha State remains one of the safest places to travel, Rich and her volunteers provide support for everything from thefts and accidents to assaults and deaths.

As a nonprofit established in 1997 by the Rotary Club of Honolulu with support from the Honolulu Police Department, VASH operates on a \$285,000 budget from Hawai‘i Tourism Authority that is supplemented by donations from businesses and the public.

“Every single case is different but at least every two months I have some friends come up to me and tell me, ‘Jessica you couldn’t pay me a million dollars to have the job that you have,’” Rich says. “Not everyone can do this.”



Jessica Lani Rich (left) and longtime VASH volunteer Robert Gentry at a volunteer recruitment event hosted by Rotary Club of Honolulu. **PHOTO COURTESY VASH**

Yet despite the emotional toll, the work can be incredibly rewarding.

“I think any time in life you feel you’re doing something meaningful it creates a positive experience,” says Gentry. “It’s not an ego thing ... it’s simply an affirmation of how we are committed to aloha.”

In the weeks before the standoff in Waikīkī, VASH was there for a couple from Texas whose 17-year-old son died in a paragliding accident and helped a man whose wife passed away unexpectedly in her sleep on the final night of their vacation — leaving him with their two young children.

“I comforted the husband and watched the children (while they moved to another hotel room). It’s typical when something like this happens, they don’t want to stay in the same room,” Rich says. “Then, when he was ready, I helped put him in touch with a local mortuary that specializes in helping visitors.

“With children it’s always the hardest, but you know, if I let my tears come down in this situation, I will be of no help to this man or his two young children.”

Instead, she focuses on the concrete, practical steps she can take to ease the burden.

In the case of the father, she also helped change his flight. A family of four had flown in, but only three would be flying out.

Technically, VASH is here to supply short-term assistance. In reality, Rich spends a lot of time with those in crisis far from home, and she checks on them after they leave.

“There was no indication that it was, ‘OK, you’re done, we’re out of here,’” says island visitor Bruce Wiley. “It was always very clear she was going to keep in touch.”

Wiley, a retired San Jose, California, police sergeant, was vacationing in Hawai‘i with his wife, Lynn, in December 2021. The couple had been married for nearly 47 years, raised two daughters and a granddaughter — and now they’d been to every state. They were planning to spend a week on Maui and a week on O‘ahu.

But Lynn didn’t make it to O‘ahu. She collapsed suddenly at their condo in Maui. Wiley called 911 and administered CPR until paramedics arrived, but she was pronounced dead at the scene.

“There is no way, despite your intellect and your education and (your work experience) that you’ll ever know the feeling of total helplessness I felt,” Wiley says.

As a law enforcement officer, he was used to getting others through crises. But far from close friends and family, he felt lost.

He sought out Rich because he’d heard how she’d helped when a fellow police officer drowned while on vacation in Waikīkī. Months after that tragedy, the officer’s family remained grateful to VASH — and that left an impression.

“Finding somebody I could turn to to help me was a true blessing,” he says. “(She) took a miserable experience and made it bearable. In a place where I was as alone as I could possibly be, I found I wasn’t alone.”

Today, Wiley is part of the Monterey County, California, Cold Case Task Force. He has a home in Idaho, warm memories of his late wife, a new life partner and, despite the tragedy he experienced, he says he would consider another trip to Hawai‘i — because of VASH.

“Jessica knows she (couldn’t) fix it,” he says of her support. “She just solves whatever problems she can to make it easier, to make it smoother. And that’s a brilliant talent.”

That talent is a result of experience, training and an extensive network of contacts.

A former news and public service director at KUMU Radio, she’s been with VASH for more than 20 years, starting as a volunteer.

Her own father died unexpectedly while on his honeymoon in El Salvador and she remembers the shock and stress of communicating with unfamiliar officials to find out what happened and how to bring his body home.

So, she really can relate to how visitors in distress may be feeling. But helping them required training.

To that end, she's a former Stephen's minister — Stephen's Ministry is a non-denominational Christian program that teaches people to care for those experiencing grief or loss. She's also trained by the Critical Incident Stress Foundation, which works with law enforcement and other first responders.

As for her network, she has contacts in hotels, police departments, local businesses, consulates and other nonprofit organizations.

“We're a team,” she says. “I can reach out to them and my goal is letting (visitors) know... they're not going to be alone through this.”

She's also the Pacific region representative for Travelers Aid International.

But perhaps the most important part of her network are VASH's 20 or so volunteers, who have gone through background screening and training. Most help visitors resolve frustrating but non-critical situations over the phone. Some help around the office. At least one makes flower arrangements for visitors in the hospital and for VASH fundraisers.

Rich takes pride in knowing most have been with VASH for years.

Gentry — who stayed with her until 2:30 a.m. during the active shooter episode — says, “One of the reasons I've stayed as long as I have is because of Jessica's professional level of understanding of what needs to be done, in addition to her extreme commitment to aloha.

“That combination is the key to bringing about a fairly positive ending to a tragic situation.”

Gentry, who was mayor of Laguna Beach, California, in the 1980s and 1990s before moving to Hawai'i, is no stranger to crises. He's dealt with wildfires, floods and public health scares. Looking back, he says he didn't have a VASH then — but he could have used one.

To learn more about volunteering for or otherwise supporting VASH, go online to visitoralohasocietyofhawaii.org.
