
Politics

Iwamoto seeks lieutenant governor post

By [Bill Buley The Garden Island](#) | Tuesday, December 26, 2017, 12:05 a.m.

Share this story



Kim Coco Iwamoto

LIHUE — Kim Coco Iwamoto says corporations spend millions of dollars to get their voices heard at the Hawaii Capitol.

If elected lieutenant governor, she wants to make sure the people are heard, as well.

“Their concerns, their solutions, making sure that everyone is held accountable to the people,” she said.

The 49-year-old from Oahu is running for lieutenant governor and recently visited Kauai in the early stages of her campaign.

“I really want to turn the lieutenant governor’s office into the people’s office,” she said.

She hears others say they are running for the office as a stepping stone to a higher office.

“That’s not why I’m doing it. I see it as a wasted opportunity, it’s an underutilized opportunity. We can make it so much more,” Iwamoto said.

The lieutenant governor’s responsibilities are not extensive, but they are important. They involve being the assistant chief executive and becoming acting governor when the governor is gone from the state. It also means issuing orders granting legal name changes, and certifying and processing documents, and keeping official papers for public reviews

“It’s very minimal,” Iwamoto said. “They have way too many staff and way too much money. That’s why I’m running, because I know it can be so much more.”

Iwamoto was born in Kauai and raised on Oahu. She said she grew up with a strong work ethic instilled early in her life delivering newspapers and helping her family’s business by washing cars.

After high school, she went to New York City with dreams for a career in fashion but faced discriminatory practices from an employer for being transgender, she said.

“At a time when there was no protections for me and people like me, I found out that the laws were really designed to protect employers,” Iwamoto said.

She decided to pursue a law degree to gain a firmer understanding to change laws to create a more just society.

“I thought, ‘This isn’t right.’ It affected my ability to pay rent, my ability to put food on the table. It was an eye opener for me about social injustice and the economic pact of that.”

Iwamoto’s father’s family emigrated from Japan to Kauai and worked in the sugar cane fields. Her mother’s family emigrated from Japan to Central California where they grew cantaloupes. After the outbreak of World War II, her mother and her eight siblings were placed in internment camps in Arizona.

“We remember the injustice of racism that allowed Japanese Americans to be rounded up and placed in internment camps. And today we protest in solidarity against the same racist xenophobia directed at our Muslim neighbors,” Iwamoto said.

Iwamoto returned from the mainland U.S. to care for her mother who had a severe stroke. Iwamoto worked at the Volunteer Legal Services Hawaii, running legal clinics in homeless shelters and later served as the organization’s managing attorney. She also became a foster parent, an experience that made her understand bullying in Hawaii’s schools.

In 2006, Iwamoto won a seat on the State of Hawaii Board of Education. During her tenure as a BOE member and later as a member of the State Civil Rights Commission, she said she fought discrimination and advocated for anti-bullying measures.

“These students really needed somebody on their side, sitting at the table-making decision and holding colleagues accountable,” she said.

Iwamoto was reelected in 2010, the last election to determine the board, which switched to an appointment process. Later, Gov. Neil Abercrombie appointed her to the Civil Rights Commission, where she stayed four years.

Today, she operates several businesses on Oahu, including affordable apartment rentals and one that invests in alternative energy and another that invests in documentaries and films

She sees her lack of government experience as an advantage.

“Truthfully, most candidates in this particular race are career politicians. They’ve dedicated their lives to public service, which is great,” she said.

She believes voters are unhappy.

“There’s this constant dissatisfaction I think voters have. And I think they really want somebody who represents their sense of reality, Iwamoto said.

“What is happening at the Capitol, there is a lot of disbelief and a lot of frustration. I’m hoping that people want somebody on the inside holding everyone accountable to the people.”

Kauai is special to her heart. She spent time here in her youth camping and fishing with ohana.

“I want to make sure your readers know I’m paying attention,” she said.

She’s aware of the impact tourism is having on Kauai, particularly the North Shore.

“There comes a point where we can actually damage the paradise that we’re marketing,” she said.

Iwamoto promises to find friends in the Legislature to get things done.

“You can’t do it alone. You need to have allies who are in the majority,” she said. “I want to make sure I’m one of those allies.”