Interview with Karen Knudsen, Director, Office of External Affairs, East-West Center

What was your involvement in getting APEC to Hawai‘i?

The President of the East-West Center Charles Morrison attended the APEC meeting in Lima, Peru as an official observer. Having attended many past APEC meetings as an official with the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (PECC) he returned to Hawai‘i with the idea that Honolulu would be the ideal location when the United States hosted APEC in 2011.

With Dr. Morrison at the helm, I was a member of a small East-West Center team that worked with members of the Hawai‘i Tourism Authority, and the offices of the Governor and Mayor to develop the proposal.

From the beginning, we knew we had to position Hawai‘i to make it stand out as the ideal location when the United States hosted APEC in 2011.

After the announcement was made that Honolulu would host APEC, the Hawai‘i Host Committee was formed and community leaders from all professions have worked hard over the past two years to ensure the success of APEC 2011.

What were some of the other potential locations?

Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Chicago, Illinois were initially under consideration. Selecting Hawai‘i, I believe, was the right choice. Hawai‘i is located at the very center of the 21 economies of APEC. Hawai‘i’s multi-cultural population and geographic location in addition to the strong proposal contributed to its selection as the site for APEC 2011.

Have you met the President or First Lady?

No, not directly, but I have met the former First Lady, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. I met her daughter Chelsea, too.

She has worked in public affairs at the Hawai‘i State Judiciary and in public relations at Milici Valenti Ng Pak DDB Needham Advertising. She is a former Pacific area specialist with the Pacific and Asian Affairs Council and outreach coordinator for the University of Hawai‘i’s Center for Pacific Islands Studies. She was a Peace Corps volunteer in Chuuk, Federated States of Micronesia. She holds an M.A. in Pacific Islands Studies from the University of Hawai‘i.

Karen Knudsen directs the East-West Center’s News and Information operations, Arts Program, Associates (alumni) Office, program representatives in the region, EWC briefings for government officials (local, national and international), and community and public relations. She was elected in 2006 to a fifth four-year term on the Hawai‘i State Board of Education (BOE) and currently serves as first vice chair of the BOE.

Interview conducted by Kathy L. Aldinger and Nicole Cacal, UH Mānoa APEC Interns, and does not necessarily reflect the views of UHERO or the University of Hawai‘i.
During the APEC Women and the Economy Summit (WES) held in San Francisco this past September, Secretary Clinton said that by increasing women’s participation in the economy and enhancing their efficiency and productivity, we can have a dramatic impact on the competitiveness and growth of our economies. What are your thoughts on this and what are some of the women’s issues that you know will be addressed or that you would like to be addressed during the APEC Summit?

I agree with Secretary Clinton that women need access to education and good health care. When women are secure economically, their children are well fed and both mother and child are healthy. When women know their children are healthy and safe they are able to focus their attention on contributing to society. How can you move forward when you’re concerned about your child’s health and well-being? And of course, both sons and daughters need equal access to a quality education.

What is your feedback about how APEC has dealt with women’s issues?

APEC touches on topics that are concern to women, as well as men. Climate change, economic issues, etc., are all issues that affect the quality of life for women and their families.

APEC provides a venue for dialogue and informal discussion in addition to the formal meetings. In addition, there are meetings that happen throughout the year with the most constructive dialogue that address food safety, health issues, education, and environmental issues, etc. All of these relate to or affect women and their children.

Have you ever visited any of the APEC economies?

Yes, I have traveled to many of the APEC economies. Specifically, I have travelled to Japan, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Malaysia, Korea, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, Mexico, and Canada.

We see that the East West Center Gallery is featuring the work of Ann Dunham. What can you tell us about Ann Dunham and her daughter Maya Soetoro-Ng?

We are very proud of the exhibit because Ann Dunham’s work as an anthropologist in Indonesia as well as her work in micro-finance, specifically her support of women. Her daughter, Maya helped guide the exhibition by providing information about her experience growing up in Indonesia with her mother. She has given several lectures about her mother’s work at the gallery.

Ann Dunham got her Masters and Ph.D. through the East-West Scholarship Program. Her dissertation was 1000 pages and is available to read at Hamilton Library. Barack Obama, Sr. received his Masters through the East-West Scholarship, as did Lolo Soetoro, Maya’s father. Maya is an education consultant at the East-West Center. As you can see, the East-West Center and the University of Hawai’i at Manoa are very proud of that family.

Maya has written a lovely children’s book, Ladder to the Moon, and she is a delightful woman and mother.