

Saying goodbye to an old friend brings reconnection with family



IN THE LINEUP

MINDY PENNYBACKER

"In the Lineup" features Hawaii's oceangoers and their regular hangouts, from the beach to the deep blue sea. Reach Mindy Pennybacker at mpennybacker@staradvertiser.com or call 529-4772.

At right, Jock Sutherland blows on a conch shell as Sammy, Gavin and Noelle Sutherland look at family memorabilia.

Below, Jock Sutherland, left, and his son Gavin return from paddling out with Audrey Sutherland's ashes with the surf breaks Jock's and Chun's Reef in the background.

The long, sprawling ocean-front house was chocolate brown, not the green of my memory.

I'd also forgotten the white shapes — shells, sea creatures, ocean craft and gear — painted on the lintels by its owner, Audrey Sutherland, who died two years ago at 94. White ginger still blossoms along the lanai that runs the length of the house, which sits on a raised foundation that lets the ocean pass underneath during flooding from big waves.

A high school friend of her son James, I'd sleep over and sometimes wake to feel the house trembling with the impact of the waves at Waimea Bay, a mile and a half away.

If the waves washed over the road, I'd call my mom in town, trying not to sound too happy about being stranded in the country.

Audrey was a single mom like my own, and their house had the same feel as ours: casual and beachy, filled with books.

Now, 40 years later, I stood on the big lawn overlooking a sandy cove and the rocky break named Jocko's after James' older brother, 1960s champion surfer Jock Sutherland. It was March 15, the ninth anniversary of my mother's death and the day Jock and his sister Noelle had chosen to scatter Audrey's ashes in the ocean along with those of Noelle's husband, James Matthew Conti, who died



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last year. Their brother James, sister Ann and Jock's son Matthew were off-island and unable to attend.

After Audrey's death, the family hosted a public memorial service, but both decedents had wanted their bodies to be donated for teaching at the University of Hawaii's John A. Burns School of Medicine.

Having missed her first memorial, I welcomed the chance to pay my respects to Audrey and think about my mom, who grew up in the country.

I arrived too late for the paddle-out and joined a few friends on the beach instead.

We greeted the group as they paddled in on their surfboards, their faces shining with sea water, sunlight and love. "I swam through Grandma's ashes," said Jock's son Gavin with a smile.

Jock held out some powder on the palm of his hand. "There was some left in my backpack."

"That was pretty awesome, spreading the ashes of the two of them," said Noelle's son Sam, a student at Whittier College.

I REMEMBERED Audrey's clear blue eyes. In her 40s she'd taken

up swimming alone along the north coast of Molokai, towing supplies in an inner tube and camping in the valleys. Once in summer, when it was flat, she dropped me off at Waimea Bay to swim back to their house.

I was so terrified by those blue depths that I never did it again.

Audrey wrote three captivating memoirs — "Paddling My Own Canoe," "Paddling Hawaii" and "Paddling North" (Patagonia, 2012) — that continue to inspire water adventurers. "Paddling North" chronicles solo treks she made along the Alaska and British Columbia coasts in her inflatable kayak; she paddled a total of 8,075 Alaska miles during summers from 1980 to 2003.

"DID YOU bring your board?" Jock asked. "You can surf."

Chun's Reef was windy, but I thought it might smooth out later. I asked if he'd been the first to surf Jocko's, amid all those rocks.

"No, but that was before leashes," he said. "Before me it was known as Noll's Reef for Greg Noll."

As we looked through family photos, Noelle recalled when she paddled with her mom to Molokai.

"She said, 'Jump in the water and take a picture so it looks like I'm alone.'"

Their mother started her solo trips when Jock was 14, he said. "She'd be gone a week. We didn't worry. She had us all trained to cook by age 12."

"And you had me; I'm six years older," Noelle said. "Mom had it all planned out!"

Out at Chun's the waves looked clean.

"It did smooth out," Jock said, catching my eye.

"Too late."

"It's springtime. There'll be more," he said. "Come again."

As we said goodbye, Noelle gave me sprouted ginger bulbs to plant.

I took the Wahiawa road from Haleiwa, something I've rarely done since James, surfing the curves in his VW bus, convinced me the Kunia-Waiialua road was the better way.

"It's where you see the line of Christmas trees," my mother said when I asked where the pineapple village of her childhood used to be.

Approaching Wahiawa in the last saffron flare of light, I turned to see the firs and the unobstructed line of the dark-blue Koolau under a cloudless sky.

