
1951-2026 Remembering Colleen Hanabusa.

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To: itsahonuworldinhawaii@hotmail.com <itsahonuworldinhawaii@hotmail.com>

Subject: Remembering Colleen Hanabusa



May 6, 2026

Dear Friends,

On the eve of Colleen Hanabusa's Memorial Service and Tribute at the Hawaii Senate Chambers, the DKII Ohana extends our heartfelt aloha for a dear friend, colleague and tireless advocate for the people of Hawaii. Senator Inouye adored Colleen. He enjoyed their many conversations on a variety of topics, and was very pleased when she was elected as a member of Hawaii's Congressional Delegation. She could go toe to toe with him, was studied, inquisitive, and of course, bold. Senator would often say, "She's a smart one and tough. I like that!"

With the permission of the Star Advertiser, we re-printed below the obituary story written by Peter Boylan who worked as press secretary for both Inouye and Hanabusa. He held a special place in both of their hearts - getting accolades and scoldings with regularity.

After Colleen Wakako Hanabusa passed away early Friday morning at age 74, she was immediately remembered as a tough, passionate, brilliant attorney and legislator who broke barriers and thrived in the minutiae of lawmaking.

“CH,” as she was referred to by many on her congressional staff, was described as a “fierce advocate” with “strong beliefs” who was always the most prepared person in the room and unafraid of any issue or opponent.

But she was also an old-school aunty who quietly took care of everybody. She once heard that a staff member in Washington, D.C, couldn't afford to pay rent in January or fly home to Hawaii for Christmas. CH didn't speak to the staff member about it, she just made sure he was on the same flight home with her.

Colleen liked an Americano coffee to start the day and preferred a hamburger or saimin for breakfast, from Zippy's on Beretania Street if it was possible.

She slept in two- to four-hour increments, always waking up to read, respond to emails or watch an episode of Mark Harmon's “NCIS” or Benedict Cumberbatch as Sherlock Holmes on PBS. She also loved to watch Animal Planet with her husband and dogs, Frannie and Pupper.

Working for the most prepared, intense attorney I have ever known could be daunting. When I worked in her Hawaii office during her second stint in Congress, I anticipated, looked forward to and occasionally dreaded the daily phone call that began, “Peeeeeter Boylan. Well. What's going on?”

That is an extremely loaded question coming from someone who knew the answer to everything and had read anything I could find better than most people. I would do my best to update her on the news that impacted her work and my ideas for messaging. Follow-up calls at any hour of the day or night were always a possibility.



But I knew I was often barely scratching the surface of the kind of depth she was looking for.

And, like an old-school aunty from Waianae with a voracious appetite for reading and thinking, she would walk me through my miscalculations.

“But, that’s OK,” she would often say at the end of a lecture. “OK, gotta go.”

THERE IS no doubt Colleen was a pugnacious human being. Small of stature and dressed in her beloved Anne Namba wardrobe, she was always ready for a fight. She grew up in a house behind her family’s gas station in Waianae and came of age as a young lawyer at a time when the profession was dominated by men.

She was fond of telling a story about a labor leader she represented who mistook her for a waitress and asked her for a cup of coffee.

She explained, as only Colleen Hanabusa could, that she was, in fact, his attorney. Each time she told the story her eyebrows would furrow and she would lean forward, her hands intricately expressing her emotions in the moment.

Colleen could tell it like it happened yesterday.

She grew up amid the working-class, commuter culture of the Waianae Coast, a culture that was at the heart of who she fought for. Watching her parents serve the community while she went to school in town every day, she saw, at a young age, the disparities between the West Side and town.

The first thing she recalled noticing was that there were more sidewalks in town where she could ride her roller skates than in Waianae. And she wanted to grow up to be someone who was smart and strong enough to figure out why and do something about it.

She worked as a labor lawyer because she believed people from every segment of society deserved the best representation.

COLLEEN would provide you with the history and context of an issue before she shared her thoughts.

I remember a town hall with kupuna in Hilo in 2014 that we were trying to wrap up to get to another event. The staff that was with her stood by the door at the back of the room, indicating it was time to go. She told the crowd she could take one more question.

A kupuna raised his hand and asked in a low slow voice, a question about Social Security.

“Thank you for that. That’s actually a very interesting question,” Colleen responded. “But you have to understand Social Security. I read the Social Security Act of 1935 and what is really quite interesting is ... ” — and we were there for another 45 minutes. And she talked about the law and disbursements and its funding with a smile on her face, like a scientist explaining a complicated yet successful experiment.

ONE OF THE ways Colleen showed her love and appreciation for people was by cooking for them. Whenever she was home to work in the 1st Congressional District, she would be sure to efficiently pack coolers with local food: pounds of frozen poke, lomi salmon, pipikaula, Portuguese sausage, lau lau and kalua pig. If she had to get the ingredients in D.C., we would take her to the Virginia suburbs where she would shop for hours, dutifully checking a list of ingredients for each planned dish.

Whether it was her fellow members of Congress or a bunch of staff members and their friends, Colleen commanded the kitchen. Dressed usually in a puka T-shirt from Waianae High School and black sweatpants, she would bounce around her kitchen that was situated between a living room area and her dining room with a high ceiling and a circular sitting area.

Colleen was the chef and enlisted staff members and anyone nearby to help stir, plate, serve, gather or clean. And that sistah could cook. She made a sushi rice dish and shoyu chicken that could launch a restaurant franchise, I am convinced. The happiest I ever saw Colleen was when she was cooking and entertaining others. The hard-charging lawmaker vanished and she was Aunty Colleen, hosting her hanai kids.

One of her Washington staffers who handled her military legislative affairs would work the grill at CH’s house. If Colleen was cooking, he was manning the steaks. On one occasion, he brought along his girlfriend. CH took note and asked her to help in the kitchen. At the end of the night as she was packing up leftovers for people to take home, she pulled the staffer aside and told him, “Don’t let that one get away.” “We’ve been married 11 years and have two kids,” he told me Friday, his messages heavy with sorrow. “Colleen knows us better than we know ourselves.”



COLLEEN NEVER wanted people to worry about her.

In 2014, while she campaigned for the U.S. Senate, she was hit with the flu and exhaustion so hard we had to take her to the emergency room on Kauai. When they let us see her, she was wrapped in blankets and shaking, rocking back and forth in the hospital bed.

She looked like a human struggling with the weight of a statewide campaign, the legacy of the late Sen. Daniel K. Inouye, and the physical strain of flying across the continent and the Pacific Ocean to persuade people they should vote for her.

But Colleen insisted she was fine and just needed to sleep it off, while also making sure we apologized for every meeting she had to miss.

When she got sick last year and abruptly stepped away from her duties at the Honolulu Authority for Rapid Transportation, I reached out and asked if she was OK. She wouldn't tell me what was wrong, and not once during her five months in the hospital did she share what she was going through or how hard it was.

"You guys are the best," she said. "BTW, is news so slow that stepping down from a volunteer board dominates?"

IN LATE January, I told her to please drink water and eat and be sure to let us know if she needed anything. She did not want visitors.

"OK," she replied. It would be the last time I heard from her.

I sent her a note on Super Bowl Sunday to let her know she was loved and we were all praying for her.

Colleen was one of the first people to show up at my grandmother's funeral, to remind her distraught, tear-soaked former spokesperson to "be strong, Boy."

She helped me through some of the toughest moments of my life and stood beside me at times few others would.

Like many other people she stepped up for when no one was watching, when there was no election to win or job to do, I will owe her, always.

I will forever hear her voice in my head and I will do my best to be Colleen Hanabusa strong for the rest of my life.

Thank you, Congresswoman.

Star-Advertiser reporter Peter Boylan served as communications director for Colleen Hanabusa's 2014 campaign for the U.S. Senate, and as her director of communications and government affairs during her third term in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Here is the link for the Memorial Service on Thursday, May 7th at 10:00 a.m. Hawaii time, should you be interested in tuning in and paying your respects in your own way and time. There will be opportunities in the future to honor her, ensuring that her legacy is carried forward. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AZ3Kw7Zh8ns>

Our warmest aloha for the Mana Wahine from Waianae - in our hearts always,

Black Shirt and DKI Ohana



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