

# TAKE A BOW, MICHELE

By Barbara Del Piano



Michele St. John

At the annual luau on October 5, everyone was enjoying the ono kaukau, the great Hawaiian music, and the camaraderie that permeated the evening's festivities. Michele St. John and friends were talking story as the entertainment wound up for a brief intermission.

At that point, Winged "O" Committee Chair Marc Haine went up to the mike and proceeded to make an announcement. Michele says at first, she wasn't really paying attention. Then she realized that Marc was announcing the latest inductee to Outrigger's prestigious athletic committee, the Winged "O." And the new member was...Michele St. John!

"Shock!" is the only word Michele can come up with to describe her feelings at that special moment. But to many members, she was a truly deserving candidate for her many contributions to the Outrigger's athletic program.

For over 40 years, Michele has paddled her heart out for the Club, which to her, is more than just a "club," but a treasure, representing friends, and family; paddling is a personal relationship with the ocean. She has not only paddled, but steered and coached as well.

Born in Michigan, Michele grew up in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Her great grandfather founded Chris-Craft, a well known boat manufacturing company, and her grandfather took the company nationwide and was responsible for its becoming one of the country's most prominent boat builders. Michele has never been far from the water.

In 1963, Michele's mother brought her young son and daughter to Hawaii for a week's vacation. It made such a

lasting impression on the 16-year-old girl that she vowed to return someday. That someday came in 1970 when Michele again vacationed in Hawaii.

While here, she met a member of the Outrigger who introduced her to the Club and it was love at first sight. She knew immediately that it was where she was meant to be. Shortly after, Hawaii became her permanent residence and as soon as she became a member, the Outrigger was her second home.

Michele's first experience in an outrigger canoe was a ride out to "Old Man's" with Fred Hemmings steering. It was a new experience for her, and when Fred yelled, "If I tell you to jump, jump!" she had no idea what might happen. Fred did yell "Jump!" as a mammoth swell came pounding toward them and the canoe hulled. Although a bit stunned, she had a blast and couldn't wait to try it again.

The experience didn't discourage her from taking up the sport, and she quickly progressed from paddler, to steerswoman, to coach. When the women's Molokai race, Wahine O Ke Kai, became official, she entered that first race and was on the winning crew; she even participated in hand-making the trophies, which were koa paddles, in Pinky Thompson's garage in Niu Valley.

In 1975, Michele coached Novice A and B, and was truly an inspiration to her paddlers. Her "Yes we can" attitude instilled in them the ingrained belief that they were going to win... first place or nothing! And they usually did. In 1987, she took on the demanding role of Head Canoe Racing Coach, the first wahine to hold such a demanding position.

Her responsibilities included recruiting coaches for the Club's more than 30 paddling crews, scheduling practices, and overseeing the entire program of both regatta and long distance races; preteens to masters were all under her jurisdiction.

Not only did Michele do an outstanding organizational job, but she motivated the paddlers to strive for victory, not only for the sake of the Club, but to uphold the tradition and legacy it represents. During her tenure, the Outrigger won five regattas during the regular season, as well as the Oahu and State championships.

After her term as head coach, Michele continued to wield a paddle, always striving for first place, always maintaining a positive attitude. In 1977, her crew went undefeated for the entire racing season.

In 2013, Michele served as Co-Chair of the Canoe Racing Committee, a sub-committee of Athletics, and one whose responsibilities are, at times, over-whelming. Finding capable volunteers to join the committee, registering paddlers, working out logistics, checking equipment, planning budgets, and the myriad details connected with the program were all part of her duties. This year, she will continue to assist the committee.

In her personal activities, she displays the same gusto and enthusiasm as she does in her serious endeavors. Al-

ways the life of the party, she is one of the few who has celebrated their birthday perched high atop the canoe in the bar. (Michelle admitted this only because, she claims, the statute of limitations has run out.)

Whether she is paddling, steering, coaching, or overseeing the entire program, Michele inspires others with her unbridled enthusiasm and gung ho attitude. Her recruiting abilities include bringing back former paddlers and new members who have never paddled before.

She says, "If they have a pulse, they're a potential paddler." She is a shot in the arm not only to Outrigger's paddlers, but to the entire Club.

She has also served on Outrigger's Board of Directors and other committees, including Public Relations, Entertainment, and Admissions and Membership.

Whatever she's involved in, she does it with the same passion and devotion that she gives to paddling.

Membership in the Winged "O" is indeed a fitting reward for such long-time, devoted service. Congratulations, Michele, and keep on paddling!