New leader says Chaminade's bound for glory

By Thomas Kaser

Chaminade University, the state's only Catholic college, is getting four "firsts" in its new president, Kent Keith.
He will be its first lay president, its first non-Catholic president (he's Protestant), its first married president, and his wife, Elizabeth, will be the first first lady of any Catholic university in the United States if not the world, according to Chaminade's retiring president and new regent, Father Raymond Roesch.

Not bad for a guy who initially didn't seek the job. A Chaminade regent approached him in April and asked if he would consider applying. Keith said thanks but no thanks, he was perfectly happy as vice president for public relations and business development for Castle & Cooke's Oceanic Properties Inc.

The regent called back a few days later to say that answer "just was not acceptable" and to ask Keith to lunch with him and another regent. Keith agreed and the two regents ended up telling him some things he didn't know regarding Chaminade's master plan and potential for growth. "I began to get excited," he recalls.

Over the next few weeks he talked to others, read materials about the college, walked the campus, and concluded that Chaminade is a good university to become a great one.

Keith, a former director of what is now called the state Department of Business and Economic Development, has one thing the regents particularly like: strong ties with Hawaii's business community.

"We want to develop the school's image and credibility in that community," says regents vice chairman Martin Schiller. "We want to convince business people we're worth supporting because of what we offer to and for Hawaii."

But it was a knock-your-socks-off interview with the regents that confirmed Keith's selection, Schiller recalls.

"We saw a young man with a vision for making Chaminade not just an alternative to other Hawaii colleges but the best liberal arts college in Hawaii and the Pacific."

After Keith left the interview, the regents talked briefly about what he had said, someone called for a vote, and he was unanimously chosen over two other finalists for the job, Schiller said.

In an Advertiser interview, Keith identified five ways he hopes to make Chaminade the best liberal arts college:

- Best in terms of having students and faculty working together as "a community of scholars," with individual and small-group attention and a common sense of purpose.
- Best in terms of having "an exciting intellectual environment that stimulates personal and academic growth."
- Best in terms of training leaders for tomorrow. "Many colleges assume that if you attend their campus for four years, you're a leader when
you graduate. I'm not willing to assume that. I think a college has to have specific leadership-training programs, and we're going to have them at Chaminade."

- Best in terms of holistic education — educating the whole person, include a personal system of values. Keith says he does not intend to make new religious demands on Chaminade's students, but he would like to strengthen its programs in religion and philosophy.

One immediate challenge

Keith says he faces is building Chaminade's student enrollment (this year, about 900 full-timers in the daytime undergraduate program, plus about 2,200 others in evening and accelerated degree programs). He said raising the enrollment is necessary to meeting another immediate need: raising faculty salaries, which are below those of comparable colleges.

But how to get more students?

"We have a lot of marketing, promoting and educating to do."

I'd like to see us develop a leadership program that will attract students. I'd like to establish exchange programs with Mainland and Asian universities, so we can attract more students.

"But most of all, I'd like to convince more local residents that Chaminade is important to them and to Hawaii — that it is a place where the focus is on teaching, where the faculty are experienced and accessible, where there are no huge lecture classes, and where the learning environment is powerful and effective."

Keith came to Hawaii with his family in 1962 and is a graduate of Roosevelt High School. He holds a bachelor's degree from Harvard University and a master's degree in philosophy and politics from England's Oxford University, where he was a Rhodes Scholar.

He is also a 1977 graduate of the University of Hawaii's William S. Richardson School of Law and practiced law for two years with the Honolulu law firm of Cades Schutte Fleming & Wright, specializing in commercial litigation and new-business development for the firm.

He recommends a law-school education even for those who are not interested in practicing law.

"I feel it provides excellent training and background for any endeavor. I know it has been particularly relevant and useful to me in the government and business positions I have had."

Chaminade, founded in 1953, is one of four private colleges in Hawaii. The other three are Brigham Young University-Hawaii, Hawaii Loa College and Hawaii Pacific College.