

# GENERATIONS HAWAII

The Good Life After 50



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## FEATURE:

# Cha Thompson

**A woman of many talents from entertainer  
and businesswoman to wife, mother,  
grandmother and college student**

By E. Shan Correa



Nothing, absolutely nothing intimidates Cha Thompson. Not creating and operating an entertainment business employing nearly 1,000 people. Not growing up in Kalihi Valley Homes, Honolulu's toughest tenement housing at the time. Not producing events that bring in tens of thousands of dollars to the charities she supports.

Not even bringing up 12 (yes, that is 12 — more about that later) children, and mothering hundreds of other young people who have worked for her over the years.

Talk with this deceptively fragile-appearing woman for a while, and you're sure to hear this challenge: "Bring 'um on!" Nothing can faze Cha Thompson . . .

". . . No wait. Maybe one thing. School."

School?

"I hadn't been in a classroom for years, and now I'm a schoolgirl at 60," she says with amazement in her voice.

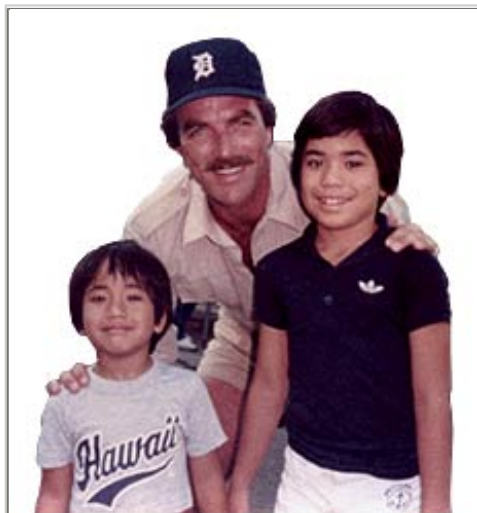
## FEATURES

### The busy life of Cha Thompson

She started dancing at age 6 and continued performing through the birth of her last child at age 32. Now, she co-manages Tihati, an entertainment empire that presents Polynesian dance revues at major hotels throughout the islands and across the Pacific. But, that's not all she does. She lends her organizational skills and personality to major charities. However, she much prefers the company of her 11 grandchildren.

### The new cosmetic surgery

Think laser instead of scalpel for many procedures. Honolulu cosmetic surgeons discuss the latest techniques and give advice on how to find the right doctor for your needs.



Sons Afatia and Eli pose with Tom Selleck on set of "Magnum PI" in 1985. Cha appeared in several episodes of television series filmed in Hawai'i.

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"When I first registered for classes at Hawai'i Pacific University, I wondered how I could compete with students fresh out of high school. My role had been to teach my own kids to value education (and thank heavens, they all have gotten their degrees), but how could I go back? What if I failed? Did I really need this? I decided, yes, I did.

"My HPU counselors not only encouraged me, they showed me how I could fit in as an adult student," she notes. "Students there are of all ages. Most need schedules that fit around their work and other commitments. I definitely was not alone."

Cha, who served on the Honolulu Police Commission ("without a degree, would you believe?"), is enrolled in HPU's Justice Administration program, and is "almost there" in attaining a Bachelor's degree in the field toward her eventual goal of getting a Masters.

"My professors are half my age. They've given me no breaks, believe me, but they've given me hope. They're firm. They want you to learn," she points out.

Cha pauses for a moment before declaring, "I consider teachers and nurses to be the next thing to God! I'll always have the utmost respect for people who choose those professions."

Her own children learned early that their mother would countenance no disrespect for their teachers. Over the years, the family of Jack ("Tihati") and Cha (whose name has a soft "sh" sound) Thompson grew to the point that it might have filled a small classroom, itself.

In addition to the five children Cha gave birth to, seven children became their own through the rich Hawai'ian tradition of adoption, hānai.

"I was working as a dancer, and we were counting our pennies and then Jack would say, 'There's this boy who's just come from Sāmoan and he hasn't anyone to stay with for, maybe two weeks . . .' and I'd say, 'No way! All we need is another mouth to feed,' and then, well, you can guess the rest."

The rest of the story is that even then, this tough lady who grew up in a tough neighborhood had a heart as big as her courage. When asked about her children, all grown now and leaving a large "empty nest," she makes no distinction between the children whom she bore and those whom she and Jack took in as their own.

Her face lights up when talking about each, and when asked if being a mother of hānai children has been as rewarding for her as it obviously has been for her children, she reflects for a moment before saying:



Cha and Kimo Kahoano sing for Jerry Lewis during a 1980 Muscular Dystrophy telethon.

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“The love is the same. The worry, and the pain you feel when one of your children is hurt or in trouble...these are the same. And believe me, that worry never stops when they get older. But there was also, in my hānai children, a special bond that was formed, I guess, because they knew they were chosen, were wanted, so they never took anything for granted. Not that the others took advantage of us. Just that there was this special, almost protective feeling there, and I love that.”

Cha and Jack’s children are fortunate in having them as parents for many reasons, some of those rooted in cultural and religious values. The special blessings of the hānai tradition, the passing along of the values of family, respect for elders (and professors), and deep appreciation for the land and for living life with joy and faith — these they have seen in their parents.

Cha is proud of her Hawaiian heritage, and treasures photographs of her family taken with Prince Jonah Kūhiō Kalanianaʻole, and with Princess Kaʻiulani, who lounges on a veranda with Cha’s family in one photo. Jack’s family adds the richness of a Sāmoan heritage. He was born on tiny Swains Island in Sāmoa, and lived there until age 7. You will hear both Hawaiʻian and Sāmoan spoken in the Thompson home.

On Sundays, the traditions of the Sāmoan feast meld with the big Hawaiʻian after-church meal (church being Kaʻimuki Christian Church) in the blended household. Everyone gathers for music and dancing, as well as for Jack’s much-heralded cooking, in the large home in Portlock.

“This is our ‘new’ home,” Cha explains. “We’ve lived on the property for many years, but finally, eight years ago, we had our old family home torn down and rebuilt here. The builders followed my orders to not cut down a single tree.”

The result is a gracious, tree-shaded home with Hawaiʻian warmth that might well have seen Princess Kaʻiulani, herself, pleasantly chatting with some of Cha’s ancestors on a lanai.

Inside, spacious rooms reflect two cultures, with an exquisite koa staircase, photographs, furniture and artifacts from Sāmoan and Hawaiʻi artfully selected to make for comfort as well as for beauty.

In the airy library, however, stands a small white table with a different look. Atop it is art work from a local artist, though not a framed print from a fine gallery. The white tabletop, itself, exhibits work in purples, pinks, blues and yellows, exuberantly crayoned from side to side.



High school sweethearts at Farrington, Cha and Jack Thompson married in 1966.

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Cha picks up the table and places it near a collection of plastic daggers, obviously possessions of small, harmless pirates.

“Grandchildren,” she sighs, her voice full of the feigned annoyance of a grandmother whose life would not be complete without the little ones. “For a while we wondered if we’d ever have grandchildren and now, suddenly, we have 11.”

In keeping with Polynesian tradition, the grandmother gives each baby his or her name. “My poor daughters-in-law, having everyone there at the birth. Can you imagine? And yes, I name them, but that doesn’t stop everyone else in the clan from voicing their opinions.”

The youngest grandchild is now 7 months old, and he seems pleased with his splendid name: Afatia Kalani Matagiolosega. His father is singer Afatia, who is fast becoming one of Hawai’i’s top entertainers, but Cha insists that there will be no “Juniors” in the family.

“Absolutely not. These children are not smaller, and lesser, copies of their fathers. No Juniors, no junior-boys.”

The tough lady then melts as she looks about the library and imagines her grandchildren there with her.

“When they come here to Puna and Papa’s house — that’s what they call us — they know there will be love...and reading. Lots of reading, always, holding them and reading to them, or the older ones lying about and listening.

“And I love becoming their favorite characters. Arthur and Kate from Marc Brown’s ‘Arthur,’ maybe, or I turn into the big Kahuna, admonishing little children who lie. They can’t escape me. At Puna’s house, they’ll be read to.”

Cha credits these children with helping her to turn her life around after a crippling bout of depression, brought on in 1993 by the death of her 18-year-old son, Eli, a Saint Louis High School honor student and star football player. She shares the story of those terrible days because she hopes that her experience might help others.

“It was a long, long time – six years of my life. It hit me physically as well as emotionally. One day, I saw that I couldn’t walk without pulling each leg forward with my hands. One slow step after another. I felt like I should not be living. I’d done the things I’d hoped to do in my life, and more. The business was thriving, the kids were thriving and they’d gotten their degrees. It had been enough. I begged God to take me.

"Then...there were our first grandchildren, needing names, needing to be held, holding life for me, as well. God was saying, 'yes, you are still needed. You have to begin your future now'."

Although Cha still suffers from a chemical imbalance and a hearing loss resulting from her ordeal, her life since then has been filled with even more opportunities to help others. At the time of this interview, she was coordinating funeral services for two persons very dear to her — her daughter-in-law, "Renie" Namakahelu Williams Foster, and her longtime friend, the legendary entertainer Don Ho — while studying for finals.

"I've never done a world funeral before," she comments about the Ho memorial that took place May 5 at Queen's Beach in Waikiki. Her goal was to give her "buddy" and the thousands attending a dignified and memorable tribute.

Cha soon will add responsibilities to her whirlwind of activities. Gov. Linda Lingle has appointed her to the Hawai'i Tourism Authority, and she has been asked to be a 2008 Miss Hawai'i Competition judge. Asked again, that is.

"I've never been able to accept before because I always had a niece, or one of my dancers competing. Pili'aloa (Gaison, the current Miss Hawai'i) has worked for me since she was 15 years old. I'm so proud of her."

Cha is amazed by the many honors her tireless work has brought her. The list would fill this article, but here are a just few that are dear to her heart:

Last year, she received a Legacy Award from the Music Foundation of Hawai'i. The Girl Scouts Council honored her as a Woman of Distinction in 2001. She was the 1986 Business Person of the Year, and voted into the Hawai'i Business Hall of Fame in 1990. For leadership in perpetuating traditional Pacific Islands culture and values, she and Jack received coveted Shining Star awards in 2006.



Cha and Jack Thompson with four of their children in 1992: Ruana, Misty Mokihana, Eli, Afatia. Left: Cha as lead dancer at Queen's Surf in 1964.

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Cha felt "complete surprise" when, in 1999, she was honored as Hawai'i's Mother of the Year. It surprised no one who knew her. She'd not only mothered a dozen children, she'd been mothering dancers such as Pili'aloa ever since co-founding Tihati Polynesian Productions 38 years ago.

"I knew every one of them then — today, I can't, but I'm still there, being firm, being tough, but they need that. We have beautiful, talented young people who could easily be exploited. They come from all over, and they have to travel to put on shows at big hotels. But each one is part of our 'ohana. We take our responsibilities very seriously."

The "we" you hear includes Cha's business and life partner, Jack. You might have seen the pair interviewed on Maestro Matt Catingub's recent "Romance in Hawai'i" television special. The Farrington High School sweethearts were dancers who, thanks to some big breaks, some chutzpah and tremendous talent, ended up forming the world's most successful Polynesian review company. What you would not have caught in the television interview were these insights from Cha on her

husband of 41 years:

"We're opposites in every way. Just look at us! He's so big he could be scary, but he's gentle, and I'm the one who's likely to explode. And I'm the one in the family who says no. The kids ask for money, he reaches in his pocket and hands them a bill...he doesn't even look to see what it is. Jack's left-brained, I'm right. He should have married a sweet, dainty, laid-back lady, and look what he got.

"There's no logic to love, I guess. Forty-one years and counting. I'm so grateful for every minute that I have with him."

Shan Correa is a former university English/journalism professor and an award-winning author of poetry and fiction whose freelance work appears regularly in the Honolulu Star-Bulletin.

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