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Molokai-to-Oahu race was 'Toots' Minvielle's dream

IT'S a love story that has withstood the test of time, even after death. Mildred Minvielle shared her late husband's dream of the Molokai-to-Oahu canoe race and now wants to thank those who are keeping it alive by crossing the Kaiwi Channel.

The widow of race founder A.E. "Toots" Minvielle is hosting an awards banquet following the 42nd men's Molokai Hoe at the Hale Koa Oct. 10. The gesture is one born out of gratitude, done with the graciousness reflecting a gentler time of polite — not political — correctness.

"Toots was not just a gentleman but a gentle man," said Minvielle, who lost her husband of 44 years in May of 1992. "And he was always so generous with his money. I remember when the boys would be going to California for the Catalina race and he would go down to the airport. Some sad-storied paddler would tell him how he had tried but couldn't save the money for the trip. Toots would write a check right there.

"And I went to the mainland every year for my convention as the past president of the National Society of Arts and Letters. He never asked me what I spent, and it was close to \$2,000 for the week. This is my way of saying thank you to him, and for him a 'thank you' to all those people I couldn't do



KEEPING SCORE

By Cindy Luis

anything for at the time of his death."

The guest list is a Who's Who of the outrigger canoe world, including some of the legends who carved a courageous niche in the sport by completing the first race in 1952. Minvielle laughs about that initial event; she understood dreams, even if she didn't know how to paddle — or even swim.

Like the incoming tide, her husband continued to return with his idea of the Molokai Channel race for nearly 20 years until three clubs were swept along with it.

"Toots wanted Outrigger (Canoe Club) to have the honor of sponsoring the race but the board kept turning him down," she said. "They'd ask: 'What are you trying to do, feed our boys to the fish?' A few years after we were married, he came home, discouraged after being turned down again.

"I told him I lived in a world where,

when I decided to be a concert pianist, they said, 'No, you can't. Have you ever seen a woman doing that?' But I had a dream that this is what I wanted to be so I studied and worked for years. I told him that he should just go it alone."

Crews from Waikiki Surf Club, Hawaiian Surf Club and Molokai's Kukui O Lanikaula spent the night on Kawakui Beach, battling fleas and nerves. In a 1959 newspaper account, Toots Minvielle told of the raging surf and cold rain that greeted the paddlers at dawn.

"We were ready to call the whole thing off," he told a reporter later. "But we all prayed and somehow the boats made it through the surf, into the channel, and the race was on."

The Minvilles flew back to Honolulu and went to the Diamond Head Look-out to wait. And wait.

"Toots was tan from all those years outdoors as a surveyor, but he was pure white with worry that something would happen," she said. "We waited and waited. It was so choppy and we couldn't see anything. He said, 'I think we'll just quietly move out of town.'"

Instead, with the Molokai crew finishing first in front of the Moana Hotel nearly nine hours after the start, the dream of channel challenges moved beyond Hawaii to the rest of the world.

Toots Minvielle has been honored

from Australia to California to England for his contributions to the sport. Next month, it will happen at home.

At the banquet, the Kalos Kagathos Foundation will unveil the "Toots," a statuette of a paddler to be given annually to the top under-18 paddler from Hawaii who best exemplifies athletic performance, educational excellence and community contributions.

The foundation also is finalizing plans for a life-size statue to be placed in front of the Maritime Museum.

It has been a long time coming, but Mildred Minvielle knows firsthand how good things come to those who wait. At age 40, after 18 years of a transpacific courtship via letters, she married the man with the adoring eyes and incredible vision.

"He was in such pain at the end (with bone cancer) but he didn't want any drugs," she said. "He wanted to think up until the last. A week before he died, he said he was going to build a canoe that would float better. I later found a diagram and I'm sure that's what it is.

"When I die, I want my ashes to be scattered off the Diamond Head Look-out. That's where the Molokai race really began for us."

Cindy Luis is a sportswriter for the Star-Bulletin. Her column appears once a week.