

# High-tech On The Homestead

**He grew up at Kuhio Park Terrace and dropped out of high school, but today Olin Lagon is a world-traveled CEO teaching computer job skills to Hawaiian Homestead residents**

By MELISSA MONIZ

This hanabata kid from Kuhio Park Terrace (KPT) turned high school dropout turned CEO has beaten the odds — and now he's working to help others stop the oftentimes generational cycle of unemployment.

At 33, Olin Kealoha Lagon has already spent two years as a U.S. Peace Corps volunteer, studied in five countries, worked out of 20 countries, started a community-owned software company in Russia, helped start up WorldPoint and is now the CEO of Hawaiian Homestead Technologies.

But all that travel and success hasn't changed this local boy one bit. He still continues to stay true to his roots, true to himself and never forgets the past that brought him to where he is today. In fact, he admits that he still hasn't lost his pidgin and could definitely do without slacks and dress shirts.

"Typical poor family: My mom had four kids, my dad died when I was 6, so it was really hard," says Lagon. "I remember

when I was growing up my mom couldn't find a job and it was really difficult. She would go literally everywhere — all the fast food chains. Then Zippy's hired her and she was so elated that she got this job that she was a dedicated employee until she retired.

"That job really changed our lives and really gave her the opportunity for us to have things, and that's one of the sources of my inspiration. I really want to work hard to build and provide jobs for people who totally deserve it."

The building of jobs to which Lagon is referring is exactly what Hawaiian Homestead Technologies does. It's a community-owned, completely non-profit organization that provides training and jobs for people living on or around Hawaiian Homestead communities.

"What we did is start an alliance with American Indians, Alaskan natives and Native Hawaiians, and as a company we market together. Our goal is to create job opportunities on native homelands," says Lagon. "These areas typically have 70 percent



Olin Lagon confers with Sam Makua on his computer-aided drafting for the Marines

unemployment and just some of the worst statistics. It's really unfortunate, so our goal is to provide jobs in these areas.

"We expect our staff to do very complex computer tasks, but we don't expect them to come with any skills. We provide all the training." HHT currently has its corporate headquarters in downtown Honolulu, one training facility in

Waimanalo and another in Anahola, Kauai. Just two years old, the non-profit organization already has 17 employees trained and employed.

"The two special things that we provide are context and ownership," says Lagon. "Our employees know this is a community-owned company and that 100 percent of our profits are invested back into the community. So they know what they are doing is really good, and so there's a lot of incentive besides just showing up at 9 and leaving at 5."

The jobs started by HHT to date include: maintenance manuals conversion for the F16, General Electric jet engine maintenance manuals conversion, various digitization projects for private-sector firms, Computer Aided Drafting conversions for the Marines, maintenance manuals conversion for two Northrup Grumman aircraft, maintenance manuals conversion for the Apache Helicopter and maintenance manuals conversion for the Air Force.

Besides being the boss, Lagon shares a warm connection with his company and the people whom it employs. He understands the challenges of growing up with less and the difficulties of achieving when expectations for your success are low.

"I grew up at KPT, so speaking from that perspective I think

there's a lot of kids who are in the same position as their parents, and my guess is that their parents are in the same position as their grandparents, and you see these cycles," says Lagon. "It's so hard to break out because when you congregate a lot of poor people together you've got domestic violence, you've got drugs, and you've got all these problems, and it's extremely difficult for a kid to break out of that. Although there's tons of talent in those communities, and kids there are just as smart as kids anywhere else, but they are severely handicapped and disadvantaged."

Lagon was one of those kids. He remembers not doing a single piece of homework from elementary school until he dropped out of high school.

"I later got my high school diploma from Pearl City High School; it was this program where you just studied mechanics and got your degree," recalls Lagon. "Then I joined the Naval Reserve, and that allowed me to leave Hawaii and get out on my own. There I did well, and my teacher there told me that I should study to be an engineer. I don't think anyone has ever told me anything like that in my life. So I came back and enrolled in Honolulu Community College. It was tough because the first day



Lagon, whose father died when he was a child, spends quality time with son Noah

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that I went to HCC, the counselor there looked at my scores and my high school dropout record, and then when I told him I wanted to be an engineer he told me that I shouldn't, and instead look at this two-year program. I remember getting into a fight with him for telling me I couldn't do it. I'm sure he was being realistic and looking out for the average interest, but I found it very frustrating. I just told myself that day that I can do it."

Long story short, Lagon transferred from HCC to the University of Hawaii at Manoa where he

graduated in 1995 with a double major and a 4.0 average. At UH he studied International Entrepreneurship and Accounting and through Study Abroad visited five countries. However, the highlight of Lagon's college career was in 1992 when he met a professor named Dr. K.K. Seo.

"I consider him my mentor," says Lagon. "And it's amazing when I look back that Dr. Seo saw this brown kid who spoke funny English and took me under his wing. We traveled to South America and Asia, and he spent a lot of time bringing out the best in me. Sort of tough love. I think he really helped to shape me."

Since, Lagon has met two other outstanding individuals credited for shaping his life — his wife, Alison, and 3-month-old son, Noah.

"My wife is an amazing woman. She is great with kids, loves teaching and was actually in the Peace Corps with me," says Lagon.

"And with Noah, every day is amazing. Being a dad is so wonderful; it's like reliving your own childhood all over again."

Lagon credits a variety of sponsors for underwriting the project. "We can do the training because of companies and organizations such as American Savings Bank, Alu Like, Akimeka, Bank of Hawaii, County of Kauai, Department of Hawaiian Home Lands, Empower Oahu, First Hawaiian Bank, Harold K.L. Castle Foundation, Hawaii Community Loan Fund, Inter-Tribal Economic Alliance, Kamehameha Schools, Kauai Community College, Kauai High School, Oahu Worklinks, Office of Hawaiian Affairs, Queen Liliuokalani Children's Center, Sandwich Isles Communications,

U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Weinberg Foundation.

These generous sponsors make

it possible for HHT to extend its reach into the community to give families the opportunity to learn the skills needed to do complex computer digitalization.



At home with wife Alison and son Noah



Lagon, a high school dropout, earned a 4.0 GPA at UH

Nathalie Walker photo

Photo courtesy Olin Lagon