

By Hugh Clark

Advertiser Big Island Bureau

HILO, Hawaii — At age 40, Oahu transplant Sig Zane is perfectly happy with his storefront, Hawaiian-oriented business in downtown Hilo.

Zane, a surfer, artist, hula dancer and merchant, is a native of Kaneohe via Manoa Valley who fell in love with the Big Island when he came to study at the University of Hawaii-Hilo in 1978. He met "Aunty Edith" Kanaka'ole, then a language and Hawaiian teacher at UHH. The rest is history.

He married the family's youngest daughter, hula dancer Nalani, and together they operate Sig Zane Designs, offering clothing and various art works created by about two dozen home artisans. Last month, Zane was named the state's top small business retail operation by the Hawaii Visitors Bureau and his wife received a National Heritage Fellow award in Washington D.C.

A perfect locale

The award honored his efforts to preserve Hawaiian culture — music, language, chant and dance — as well as for the clothing designs that feature Hawaiian plants.

Sig Zane Designs' location on Kamehameha Avenue — a site occupied by Edith's Dress

Shop for 38 years before its owners retired — is perfect, Zane said from his second level office as he watched shoppers survey his downstairs offerings on a quiet weekday morning.

One of the advantages, he said, is that, with special weather conditions the best surfing spot in Hilo Bay is just outside his door.

Zane said those who would play down his role as a small town merchant don't understand he has it all — a wonderful family (his wife and their 10-year-old son, Kuha'o); an opportunity to surf at whim; and an unchallenged ability to create.

"I am having my cake and eating it too," he laughed, stressing his travels to the East Coast and to Holland to promote a native lifestyle once feared lost.

Artifacts emporium

He and Nalani, joined by nearby restaurateur Larry Johnson and others, later this month are opening Kaipalaoa Landing — midway down the block in the historic Kennedy Building, renovated last year.

That will be "an emporium of contemporary artifacts" from Hawaii and elsewhere, Zane said, which he hopes will enhance the historic block.

Sales from the store also benefit a Hawaiian language immersion program at Keaukaha — Hilo's Hawaiian Homestead area — and the Kanaka'ole family hula halau.

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