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Canoe build was an exercise in perseverance for Gentry Homes executive

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Hoomau, a Hawaiian word that means to persist, is a fitting name for the canoe Rick Hobson crafted by hand.

After seven years of work on the vessel — delayed in part by a 2018 cancer diagnosis — Hobson, vice president of sales and marketing for Gentry Homes and the company broker, who's also a canoe paddler and woodworker, was able to launch Hoomau in late August. A blessing ceremony was held in October.

The story of Hoomau starts with a log, washed ashore on Oahu's North Shore more than a decade ago, but Hobson's own journey starts long before that.

Originally from California, Hobson was offered a job with Gentry Homes in 1996, and moved to the Islands with his wife and two now-grown children.



HOBSON FAMILY

Rick Hobson, vice president of sales and marketing for Gentry Homes, spent seven years constructing his canoe, Hoomau, the hull of which came from a log that washed up on Oahu's North Shore.

"So this is where we raised our family. This is where Hawaii has become our home," he recently told Pacific Business News. "Even though we were both California natives, Hawaii has become our home. Canoe paddling, canoe racing, canoe building have become a big part of my life since moving here."

Canoes weren't an interest before moving to the state, he said, but "when in Rome."

"I got here and ... one of my managers actually suggested I get involved with a canoe club and suggested the Outrigger Canoe Club, so I was able to join in my early 30s and I'm almost 60 now, so I've been there a while."

At 38, Hobson began woodworking; he wanted to make a koa paddle for his father's 60th birthday, and asked a paddling friend, Tay Perry, for help.

"So I made a paddle and then subsequently I started working with him on the canoes down at the Friends of Hokulea and Hawaii Loa shop, which was on Sand Island, and started learning how to repair canoes," he said. "For several years, I just helped sand and varnish and patch and refinish koa canoes ... and then an opportunity came up where there was a log that had been started by a man I knew and his son, but it was just sitting there doing nothing. ... Tay said 'why don't you buy that and build your own canoe?'"

By that point, Hobson said he felt comfortable and had learned enough to do just that.

The log was first found near Mokuleia on Oahu's North Shore, by Perry's friend Rodney Romans, who had sold it.

"I think the canoe's journey and my journey, there's parallels between the two," Hobson said. "This canoe washed up on shore as a log from Southeast Asia, coming from that direction to Hawaii. I washed up on shore coming from the other direction, from California, with my family and started to rebuild and build a new life here."

Hobson knew and had paddled with Romans, who died in 2006.

"He was a well-respected paddler and I knew he was the one that brought the log off the beach," he said. "So that was interesting to me, too, because I had a connection to him. I felt connected to it from the beginning. I think that's a big thing, is that I felt connected to it through Rodney and through canoe paddling and my experience of being with those two guys together. ... So I felt compelled to attempt this, to proceed, and it's taken a long time."

In late 2015, Hobson began work on his canoe, but in March 2018, he was diagnosed with stage 3 esophageal cancer.

Hobson, who has been cancer-free for four years now, underwent chemotherapy and radiation, and surgery to remove the tumor.

"That was four years ago, but it took me two years to recover from that," he said. "... [For] two years, [the canoe] just sat on the side of my house and I would lay in bed, thinking about it. ... I think the canoe helped me in my recovery, in that while I was sick, the thought of not finishing it encouraged me to work hard in my recovery.

"Then once I got ... strong enough to where I could start again, it made me stronger, because sanding and cutting wood, and all the things involved in canoe building, is really hard work. It helped build me up again to where now, I can take it out and enjoy it with my friends and family, and really I'm basically back to where I was."

At times, though, Hobson said he never wanted to see another canoe.

"It's so much work and it's so slow and, at times, painstaking, that you get to the point where you're just like, 'OK, I've had enough of this,'" he said. "But again, it drives you on to finish, and that's the name, in Hawaiian, is to be persistent. Hoomau. So that's where the name comes from — it's the act of being persistent and not giving up."

According to Hobson, the original log is meranti, a wood from Southeast Asia, which makes up the main hull, while the gunwales and manus are Big Island koa, and the wood for the seats, iakos and ama — koa, hau and albizia, respectively — came

from Maunawili.

After such a long process, Hobson said finishing the canoe was "one of the best days of my life."

"Having my son and my mentor ... just being able to have it in the water and paddle it and take people I love out in it and share it with them, was a great feeling."

But would he do it again?

"Yes," he answered quickly, adding with a laugh, "If you asked me that a year ago, I would have said no."

"But now that it's done ... the feeling of completing it and putting it in the water and sharing it with my family and friends ... and other people, it's a good feeling. It's a feeling of great accomplishment."

Now that it's finished, Hobson is looking to find a home for the vessel that might be interested in displaying the canoe for educational purposes, similar to those on display at some Oahu resorts. The lease or sale of the canoe will, in part, benefit Friends of Hokulea and Hawaiiiloa and the Honolulu Men's Shed.

"That's what I'm looking today [to] do, too," he said. "I'm looking to find a home for Hoomau, so people can learn about Hawaiian canoes and culture, and it will help, through the annual donation, perpetuate the culture of canoeing in Hawaii."

Anyone who might be interested in displaying the canoe can contact Hobson at 808-292-0522 for more information.

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