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State's new first lady exudes passion and energy

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Gov. Neil Abercrombie and his wife, Nancie Caraway were seen before the start of

the Governor's inauguration ceremony on Monday at Iolani Palace.

In her years as an educator, activist and politician’s wife, Nancie Caraway has developed a well-deserved reputation as an outspoken advocate on behalf of the causes she champions.

Whether it’s crusading against human trafficking and domestic violence or fighting for women’s empowerment, those who know her best say hers is a voice you can always count on.

Now she can add a new title to her resume: first lady of Hawaii.

But while her husband, Neil Abercrombie, ran on a message of bringing change to Washington Place, few expect that slogan to also apply to Caraway.

"I think it’s unavoidable. She is a person who, I think, will make her presence known," said Manfred Henningsen, a political science professor at the University of Hawaii at Manoa who also was chairman of Caraway’s Ph.D. committee.

Caraway was not made available for interviews prior to the inauguration. She takes on a role that hasn’t been filled in eight years, following the two terms of Gov. Linda Lingle, who was twice divorced and unmarried during her years in office.

And while the position of first spouse has no formal description in statute, few expect Caraway to simply accompany her husband to state events.

Preceding Caraway, Vicky Cayetano never gave up her title of president and chief executive officer of United Laundry Co. and became a voice for businesswomen in Hawaii. Her predecessor, Lynne Waihee, was a champion for literacy.

Caraway’s issue may be what issue to focus on.

She is an author, playwright and documentarian with an academic background in communications, political science, human rights, the environment and Hawaiian culture.

At the request of the Obama administration, she serves as a consultant to U.S. Ambassador Luis C. de Baca in the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. Closer to home, she is a mentor at the East-West Center's Asia-Pacific Leadership Program, guiding research of students in human rights, political science and women's rights in Asia.

"She's interested in writing and film and what's going on around her — what's happening to people — and she's a person that offers you a lot to connect to," said Elisa Johnston, publications manager at the East-West Center who has known Caraway since their undergraduate days at UH-Manoa. "I think Nancie will remain engaged in the activities that have always interested her."

CARAWAY ARRIVED in Hawaii in the early 1970s from Houston, and was working as the resident manager at the Princess Kaiulani Hotel when she attended a leadership seminar and met one of its organizers, Amy Agbayani, who today is the director of UH-Manoa's Office of Student Equity, Excellence and Diversity.

Agbayani became a mentor to Caraway and encouraged her to enroll at UH, where she would go on to earn her bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees, all in political science. (She also completed a master's degree in journalism from Columbia University.)

It was at a leadership seminar where, as part of a project, Agbayani introduced Caraway to a freshman state representative from Manoa.

"They must have hit it off," Agbayani said.

The two were married in 1981 on the birthday of Nelson Mandela, July 18, in honor of the South African leader they both admired.

"They're really good partners because he has never asked her to be anything other than what she is — doesn't want her to change or to behave or look like anyone else," said Maya Soetoro-Ng, the sister of President Barack Obama who has known the couple since 2003.

"You kind of fall in love with her as a person, first, through Neil's eyes because he really loves her a great deal," she added.

That's not to say they always agree.

Henningsen has had them over for dinner several times, and while a lot of terms could be used to describe the table conversation, "boring" would not be among them.

"They are very vivacious," he said. "Fireworks go off and Nancie is very often more outspoken than Neil is."

He added: "She has a political head on her shoulders. I felt she was, later on, Neil's political conscience. She was sometimes more principled than Neil; Neil was more pragmatic. Certain issues she didn't let go."

Caraway also helps keep the politician grounded, Johnston says, making sure his schedule in Hawaii — when he's away from work — includes time with both old friends and newer ones met from her arts, community service and academic circles.

"I think this means that she'll keep doing the same thing as first lady," Johnson said. "She'll keep Neil plugged into the things that interest him but that tend to get dropped from the governor's schedule, things like theater and film, lively informal debate, and the more reflective side of life."

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