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An Extreme Makeover

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by Rob Kirkbride

Michael DuGally got a phone call from ABC. The network needed 22 complete workstations shipped to the Keiki O Ka Aina Family Learning Center in Honolulu, Hawaii.

And by the way, ABC added, they need to be there in 10 days. DuGally, the president of AIS, didn't hesitate. "I told them we could do it," he said.



That's when AIS became part of the frenetic, fascinating world of Extreme Makeover Home Edition. The season's first episode, a two-hour special, aired Sunday night and featured the recreation of the Keiki O Ka Aina Family Learning Center, a project in which AIS was intimately involved.

"ABC saw us on the Internet," DuGally explained. "They saw all the big projects

we've done under the case studies section of our web page. I think ABC assumed we were a little bigger than we are."

Still, the company based in Hudson, Mass. took on the project and got to work. The aptly named Extreme Makeover Home Edition usually focuses on homes. But at the last minute, the network decided to build a community center as well. To understand its decision, you need to know the story of Momi Akana. Akana started a nonprofit organization that supports the native Hawaiian community by offering cultural educational programs for free to those who would not normally be able to afford them. She called it the Keiki O Ka Aina Family Learning Center.

For the past 11 years, Akana was sharing her home with the program. In 2004, a major flood washed away half the foundation leaving only a couple pillars to support her home. The home not only became unfit for the community center, but also the family.

That's when ABC and Extreme Makeover Home Edition stepped in. The idea was to build a new home. But when they identified the need for the family center as well, it was added to the project.

The show is legendary for tearing down and building homes quickly. The climax of the show is when a set of buses parts and shows off the project to the family, which is sent away on a week-long vacation. The unveiling usually is accompanied by sobs and tears of joy.



But Extreme Makeover Home Edition never built a commercial structure before. And they quickly realized it's not the same as a house.

"It was a new variable for them," DuGally said. "What do you have to do to build 22 offices? They had no idea. You don't build it on the spot. You build it in a factory.

"When they called us, we said: 'Why build the offices out of drywall when we can help you build a world class office space?'"

The community center was using folding tables and chairs for desks. Ergonomics and luxury offices were foreign concepts to the cash-strapped nonprofit. With the promise made, AIS had to deliver. But it wouldn't be easy to ship the workstations from the East Coast to Hawaii more than 5,000 miles away and have it assembled in less than 10 days.

"We knew it was going to be hard to pull off," DuGally said. "The problem was more logistics than anything else."

DuGally immediately got on the phone with AIS's vendors. DesignTex would supply its Bilbao fabric, made of 48 percent bamboo, for the AIS Matrix workstations. "Every vendor that could step in and help, did," he said.

That's when the factory started humming. DuGally put 10 people on the job to make the workstations. They did the job in about three days and walked the project through the factory so there were no delays.

AIS put the workstations on a truck and four drivers took the furniture from Boston to Long Beach. The truck arrived at noon and the ship would leave the docks at 6 p.m.

The furniture arrived in Honolulu and The Systemcenter, a local office furniture dealer, took over. The dealer donated a crew of six workers to the project, who worked 26 hours straight to get the furniture assembled and in place.

The assembly wasn't easy either. Workers were still in the community center painting while the furniture was being put together. The crew from The Systemcenter put it in place while cardboard was still covering the floor.

The furniture work was





finished right before host Ty Pennington shouted "Bus driver, move that bus" and unveiled the project to the family.

"Momi came in and just cried," DuGally said. "They absolutely love it. The staff is mostly volunteer or low-paid workers in a learning center for children. They focus on educating rural kids who don't get that otherwise.

"Now they have a conference room, training center and professional

offices. They are now working in a world class office space."

All the furniture and work was donated. But AIS learned more about itself than the importance of charity.

"This project reminded us how far we could push our capabilities," DuGally said. "It showed what we can do in a pinch to meet a client's needs." That determination has helped AIS grow from a \$14 million company in 1998 to a \$100 million company today.

The company started out in refurbishing and clone systems. In 2000, it effectively started over. The company started building and marketing its own furniture, which is when sales started taking off.

"This project served two purposes for us," DuGally said. "It allowed us to do something good and to tell our story. You don't get an opportunity like that too often. It is our 15 minutes of fame.

"Herman Miller furniture is on TV shows every week. It might not be exciting for them anymore, but it's a big deal for us."

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