

Bleak economy has many in Hawaii facing 2009 with uncertainty

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By [Mary Vorsino](#) Advertiser Staff Writer Thursday, January 1, 2009

Oscar Valdivia expects 2009 to be a tough year. His job as a pharmaceutical representative, he said, is not altogether secure these days. He and his wife, Tamara, have already cut back on spending. For Christmas, the two didn't exchange gifts, instead only buying presents for their daughters — ages 2 years and 14 months.

"Every little chance, we think twice before spending or buying," said the 39-year-old Kailua resident, as he and his family shared granola bars in the grass outside the Children's Discovery Center in Kaka'ako. Valdivia added that he isn't too optimistic about the prospects of an economic turnaround in the new year. He's just hoping the markets don't continue to decline. "As long as it doesn't get worse," Valdivia said.

Many Hawai'i residents are ringing in 2009 today with both trepidation and optimism. The new year promises lots of worry — more potential lay offs, store closings and tough times. And plenty of folks — young and old, parents and singles, workers fresh out of school and those nearing retirement — are fearful of the financial pressures they're sure to face. Already, many in the Islands are hurting.

Nonprofits are being swamped by increases in need, from people asking for emergency food aid to families seeking shelter. People are increasingly having to make tough choices about which bills to pay, what spending to cut, even whether to keep sending their kids to private school. But despite the financial turmoil, many Hawai'i residents are also hopeful about 2009. For one, they're confident that things will get better, eventually. And they're grateful, now more than ever, for what they have. "I just thank God me and my wife both have jobs," said Edwin Bolosan, 35, a bus mechanic, while grabbing a sushi lunch at Ward Warehouse with 9-year-old daughter Caitlyn.

Bolosan, whose wife is a legal secretary, said he has cut back on spending because of the economic downturn and has seen his retirement savings shrink by about \$15,000 this year. For Christmas this year, he limited himself to spending about \$300 on gifts for his family. Last year, he spent about \$2,000. In the new year, Bolosan said, "I just hope the economy will recover."

Looking for blessings

With all the financial worries Hawai'i residents face in 2009, more people likely will be visiting shrines this New Year's Day for a traditional Japanese blessing. The Hawaii Kotohira Jinsha-Hawaii Dazaifu Tenmangu temple anticipates more than 8,000 will drop by today. "Every little blessing helps," said Irene Takizawa, whose husband, Masa Takizawa, is the priest at the shrine on Olomea Street in Kalihi. While many people are fearful, "there is also hope," she said. "We're all trying to stay positive."

Demitri Marmash, an engineer at a recording studio, said he knows people are hurting just by how deserted shopping centers and shops are these days. This new year, he's wishing for just one thing: "A better economy." OK, Marmash adds quickly, maybe two things. His second wish: "For gas prices to stay down."

Josephine Koga, 69, who works at a Subway sandwich shop, said no amount of economic turmoil is going to get her down. "Life is wonderful," she said, laughing. "I appreciate what I got. I appreciate my health." Her family has adopted that attitude for the new year. And for Christmas, everyone exchanged practical gifts: stuff people needed, no fancy gadgets or expensive trinkets (though the kids did get toys).

Despite all her positivity, Koga also recognizes — and feels for — the countless people going through difficult financial straits. "I'm hoping the economy will be better," she said, "especially for families with children." Richard Nagahiro, 66, said he and his wife, a longtime secretary at Maui Divers Jewelry, haven't had to curtail their spending habits because of the economy. But he worries about what the new year will bring for his daughter and her family. "For them, it's a little shaky," he said. His 36-year-old daughter stays home to take care of her 3-year-old son. His son-in-law, he said, is a sales representative for a paint company. "I'm hoping he doesn't get laid off," Nagahiro said.

Cutting back

It's younger families Neal Hirasaki worries about, too. The registrar at Kalani High School, who lives in Waikale, said he hasn't had to make any drastic cuts to his spending. He did forgo buying a new flat-screen television, he said with a laugh. But, he said, families with small children, new mortgages and bottom-of-the-rung salaries face tough choices. Worse, they're the ones in greatest danger of lay offs. "I don't know how the younger people get by," he said.

On a recent afternoon at the Children's Discovery Center next to Kaka'ako Waterfront Park, dozens gathered for a family-friendly day of fun. Though the economy wasn't at the front of people's minds as they played with their kids or picnicked, it wasn't far from it either. Outside the center, Andrea Bender sat in the shade with her two daughters, 6 and 4 years old, snacking on pretzels and juice. Bender said she and her family are looking to do some creative budgeting in the new year. Bender, a teacher at Punahou School, and her husband, a forklift operator for a food distributor, have already cut back on expenses.

Now, they're also trying to figure out how to send their youngest daughter to private school. Their older daughter attends Punahou free since Bender teaches there. "We're concerned," Bender said. Nearby, Tiffany Sera, a public school teacher, was walking into the Children's Center with her daughter. Sera said she just returned to work after taking time off after the birth of her second child. During the leave, she and her husband accumulated more debt than they would have liked. That made Christmas this year a bit tough. But Sera said this New Year's she and her husband, a hotel manager, are more grateful than ever for things they used to take for granted — "for having a job, a car, a place to live," she said, with her daughter in her arms.



Rev. Masa Takizawa of the Hawaii Kotohira Jinsha-Hawaii Dazaifu Tenmangu temple, holds an ema. Wishes and goals for the new year are written on the back of these wooden tablets, just some of many omamori (good luck amulets) sold at the Shinto shrine in Kalihi for the new year. About 8,000 people are expected to visit today for blessings and bowls of ozoni mochi soup. The New Year's event, running through 5 p.m. and including a lion dance, is free and open to the public.

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