

Ulalia Berman: A young kumu hula of today

By Leilehua Yuen

Walk up to her home, and you know a kumu hula lives there, even without the banner proclaiming "Ulalia School of Hawaiian Dance."

Ulalia Kaai Berman's carport is filled with hula instruments, hula costumes, and a carpet rolled up between the cars. Before classes, the cars are moved out, the carport swept, and the carpet unrolled. Then classes may begin.

Inside Berman's home, lauhala mats cover the floor. Hula memorabilia rest on the shelves and hang from the walls. Bolts of fabric for hula costumes lie in her closet.

Berman was born with one leg shorter than the other. "For exercise I went to an aunt who did lomilomi massage and taught me balance and dance" as part of her physical therapy, Berman said.

Little Ulalia then began taking the Department of Parks and Recreation Summer Fun hula classes at Puunui Playground in Nuuanu. There, she was taught by Auntie Rose Lane and then by Auntie Alice Kuuleialohapoiianaolenamake lua.

During those Summer Fun classes her interest in hula grew, so Berman signed up for classes with Auntie Maiki Aiu Lake. Through Lake, Berman was exposed to kumu hulas such as Iolani Luahine, Lokalia Montgomery, and Mary Kawena Pukui.

At home, such people as Gabby Pahinui and Joe Diamond would drop in to talk

story and jam with the musical Kaal family. "I come from a line of musicians. My daddy, grandfather, they traveled in the Far East. They were troubadours," Berman said. Her grandfather wrote Puu Waa Waa.

Now, Berman passes her music and dance heritage on through her own children and her halau. Although she teaches, "I'm a young kumu of today, I still have a lot to learn," she said. "But each time you do something, it is learning."

A memorable learning for her was the 1985 South Pacific Festival, when she was selected as one of those representing Hawaii. Now, her son, Lono, has been selected for the next festival. How does she feel? "In awe...Lono asked me for help. He said he wasn't expert in anything," Berman said. Drawing on her own experience she was able to advise him that the interviewing panel was looking for people with a basic fund of knowledge, yes, but more important was an interest in learning and exchanging knowledge. "And he made it. He made it on his own credit."

Berman's daughter, Hoolahi, is currently preparing for the Merrie Monarch hula festival. She dances with Nani Lim's Halau Na Lei o ka Holoku. "She wanted to go more for competition, so it's a good opportunity for her, since we are not competing right now," Berman said.

In her Halau, Berman tries to instill a "tradition of pride," she said. "It's sharing

something for an everyday lifestyle." For the children's classes, this includes the whole family, not only the child in the halau. "Parents have to be groomed as well as the children. I ask the parents to dress up for the performances. I ask moms to wear nice muumuu. I ask dads not to wear bermuda shorts. Nice jeans are okay because some people just wear that, but they should have on a nice aloha shirt, or at least a shirt with a collar. The dancers work hard, and the audience should dress up and look festive to show that they respect that," Berman said.

Berman opened her School of Hawaiian Dance as "a means to be at home and help raise my family. It's still at home but now I also teach at the Keauhou Shopping Village."

Berman is also a resource teacher with the Department of Education's Hawaiian studies Kupuna program. "We need to share the culture...If we don't teach it to our own children we will be at a loss. The kupuna program carries on the culture, broadens it and brings it to the different ethnic groups that live in Hawaii today," she said.

When not teaching in the public school system or her own halau, Berman works nights as a hostess in the Tiare Room at the Royal Waikoloa. "All of the jobs complement each other. They are all people oriented," she said.

Asked how she would define herself, Berman thought back to an interview



Ulalia of Ulalia School of Hawaiian Dance.

in Tahiti. Berman's halau had performed and then she had been invited to dance, herself. "In the interview the lady said, 'Ulalia, you are a dancer.' That compliment made me so happy...I am a dancer, and I am a teacher who is still learning because I enjoy the dance."

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