

Iwilani Silva Ohelo

Iwilani Ohelo, kumu hula of the Halau Hula O Na Pua Mokihana, and the Kalihi Palama Culture and Arts community hula and Polynesian dance classes, has the distinction of being one of only five haumana certified as a kumu hula by the renowned hula loea, Mrs. Rose Joshua during her 40 year career of teaching the hula. She is also recognized as a talented musician, chanter, vocal artist, mistress of ceremonies, producer, director, and choreographer of Hawaiian and Polynesian shows.

~~Ms. Iwilani subscribes to the philosophy that the hula is a precious legacy and cherished tradition entrusted to those kumu hula to be shared traditionally from generation to generation as a means of preserving and perpetuating the legends, folklore, language, culture, the arts, and the history of Hawaii.~~

She states, "Hula is my life and my life is hula."

I began learning the hula at three (3) years old. During that time, there were only a few kumu hula who taught hula to children at that young age. I was fortunate to have kumu hula, Mrs. Rose Look, a family friend, invite me to join her beginning childrens' hula classes which were held at her home on 6th Avenue in Ka'imuki. Mrs. Look studied with renowned hula masters including Alice Keawekane Garner, Kamuela Nae'ole, and Lokalia Montgomery. She focused her instruction on the fundamentals of the hula. It was she who helped develop my basic hula foundation. After three years of hula training, Mrs. Look stopped teaching, and relocated to the Ewa district of O'ahu. Prior to closing her Ka'imuki halau, she assisted her students with referrals to other kumu hula in the area. She recommended me to Mrs. Rose Joshua, the Kumu hula and proprietor of the Magic Hula Studio on Kalakaua Ave.

I found Mrs. Joshua to be a sincere and beautiful person as well as an excellent hula instructor. She was very caring, patient, nurturing, and especially loved teaching children. Learning the Hawaiian culture and hula under her tutelage, was the most rewarding and enjoyable part of my life. Aunty Rose Joshua, as she was called by the younger students of her halau, used a holistic approach in teaching and taught us to be well rounded dancers. Not only did we learn the hula kahiko and 'auana dance stylings, we were taught the 'oli and other chanting techniques, we learned the mo'olelo as well as the Hawaiian and English lyrics to the mele hula, and were trained as olapa and ho'oponopono on the use of traditional musical instruments to accompany the hula as well as appropriate costuming and adornments. Her teaching methods were thorough and enabled us to gain important knowledge and an understanding of the dances we performed. As part of our learning experience, we were required to conduct our own research on selected chants and mele which included studying the Hawaiian lyrics, knowing the composer, the historical significance or background of the song and possible kauna, if any.

Mrs. Joshua's Halau, the Magic Hula Studio was noted for its unique hula styling. Her styling can be best described as graceful, elegant, and expressive of the dancer's inner spiritual beauty while embracing a love for the hula as a cherished legacy of an ancient and proud Hawaiian civilization. It is a dance styling born of tradition and inspiration from the heavenly Creator which entrances and captures the hearts of those honored with its presentation. This is the hula, which I wanted to preserve and perpetuate as a dancer and a teacher.

As a haumana of the Magic Hula Studio, I was privileged to also learn hula kahiko and chanting techniques from the hula master, Henry Mo'ikeha Pa who shared the Magic Hula Studio as a partner with Mrs. Joshua.

In addition, we also received instruction in Maori, Tahitian, Samoan, and Tongan traditions, culture, music, and dances. Each year, Mrs. Joshua would host special workshops and classes conducted by notable Polynesian Cultural resources visiting Hawaii and the Polynesian Cultural Center who would teach at the studio. These sessions enabled me to gain an appreciation of my Hawaiian and Polynesian heritage.

After studying the hula with Mrs. Joshua for over twenty-one years, I was selected as one of five haumana who were chosen to 'uniki. This was such a very special honor for me because Mrs. Joshua had not given certificates to any student in all of her forty years of teaching hula. The ceremonial presentation of the certificates were held as part of a hula ho'ike to which other kumu hula were invited. As she awarded me her certificate, Mrs. Joshua gave me her blessings and encouraged me to carry on her hula styling as a kumu hula of my own halau. She passed on shortly after the graduation ceremonies.

I first started teaching the hula I learned from the Magic Hula Studio at the early age of thirteen (13). While attending St. Patricks School I taught my classmates hula which were performed during the school's May Day programs and Aloha Week Festivals. During my high school years, I voluntarily assisted in teaching hula for the May Day programs at Kalani and Kaiser High Schools. After graduating from High School, I began teaching hula classes in various hotels, schools, church and community facilities.

In 1980, while I was already married, I decided to open my own halau in our family home in Kapahulu. At the same time, I began teaching hula and Polynesian dance class at the Kauluwela Recreation Center under the auspices of the Kalihi-Palama Culture and Arts Society, Inc. Next year, our halau will be celebrating 17 years of sharing hula and Polynesian dances in Hawai'i.

Today, many hula teachers focus strictly on the hula. While I believe strongly in preserving and perpetuating the hula as fundamental to the Hawaiian culture, I have come to appreciate the perspective that as Hawaiians we need to also reaffirm our ancestral Polynesian heritage. If you are firmly grounded in hula, the learning of the dances of other Pacific Polynesian peoples will help you become a well-rounded dancer and increase opportunities for a professional career as a dancer. Many of the

shows in Waikiki and abroad prefer to hire performers who have a solid training in the hula as well as other Polynesian dances.

When the time comes and I feel that my haumana have earned the opportunity to graduate from my halau, I will uniki those deserving students. However, they must assure me that they will uphold the quality standards of my dance academy, cherish my teaching legacy and will teach only what is pono. They will need to have sufficient knowledge of the Hawaiian language, an appreciation for the positive values of our Hawaiian kupuna, and be able to translate a chant or mele, as well as create an entire interpretive hula using traditional hand gestures that authentically enhances the poetic meaning of the lyrics. They will need to celebrate the hula as an art and as creative expression of life.

Hula is my life and my life is hula. The knowledge imparted to me by my kumu hula and cultural mentors is a precious legacy which I shall always cherish and endeavor to perpetuate with aloha.

I see the hula changing. There appears to be more hula steps being performed now than the traditional hula foot movements that I learned during my hula training. Today's kumu hula have added their own creative expressions to this art which often excites an audience but also frequently raises the question of whether tradition is being preserved or sacrificed. The kumu hula's creativity is the signature of a halau styling. I believe that we as kumu hula can be creative within the realm of tradition as long as we preserve the integrity of the culture and authenticity of the dances which were shared with us by our Hawaiian ancestors. The hula is a celebration of the life of the Hawaiian culture and will live forever as long as we continue to share this legacy.