

*Original*

NANA I NA LOEA HULA  
KUMU HULA: LEILANI MENDEZ  
INTERVIEWER: LOVINA LEPENDU  
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(ALOHA LEILANI) Aloha Lovina. (CAN YOU GIVE ME YOUR FULL GIVEN NAME) Grace Margaret Leilani Sharpe. (AND YOU WERE SAYING THAT YOU HAVE TWO NAMES.) Yea, I use two names. In the hula world it's Leilani Sharpe Mendez, but actually my given name is Grace Margaret Leilani Sharpe; and of course I'm now Mrs. Mendez. Sharpe is my maiden name. (DO YOU TEACH PRESENTLY?) Yes I do. (CAN YOU TELL ME WHERE?) I teach in Wai'anae, the Wai'anae area. At the Wai'anae Intermediate cafetorium. I have children ranging from age 5 up to kupunas ranging to age 75. Well, actually last night it was range 76.

(DO YOU HAVE A NAME FOR YOUR HALAU?) Yes. The name of the halau used to be Hau'oli Hula Halau, and that was given to me by Aunty Pauline Kekahuna and Aunty Vicky I'i Rodrigues, actually by Aunty Pauline really, because that was her name, it was a trio name. And then when I came into existence with her group in 1970, playing music for her in 1972, I started the first hula halau under that name by permission of Aunty Vicky, that was her choreographer, and Aunty Pauline that was the leader of the group. (AND THEN YOU HAD CHANGED SINCE THEN?) When Aunty Vicky passed

away, I thought it only by respect instead of holding the name anymore I thought that I take a new name and let that name go to rest. When Auntie Pauline passed away I held on to that name because Auntie Vicky had not passed away yet. Three or four years ago Auntie Vicky passed away and at that time I spoke with my mother, Mrs. Lydia Sharpe, and my husband, Joseph Mendez, and we decided that why don't we rest the name because this name was also Auntie Pauline's first, not hula halau, but first senior girls that kind of held the name because it was her trio name. (CAN YOU NAME THE HAU'OLI GIRLS?) They were Ala, Leina'ala Heine Kalama, or I should say Kalama Heine, Florence Koanui, Mapuana Yasui, Jade Hein, Leimomi Ho, Hu'i Park. They were the hula dancers for Auntie Pauline because in those days Auntie was very busy with the learning. She was busy with lots of jobs. She was the originating trio for the Ilikai Hotel. And Auntie Napua [Stevens] is the one who got her in there, because she was the head activities matridee, anyway she was the head activities choreographer I think, whatever you call that. (YOU WERE WITH THE HAU'OLI GIRLS TOO?) Yes. I was a dancer and then a solo singer/dancer, and then Auntie Vicky decided that I could be into the music line, with the agreement of Auntie Pauline. So that's how I was able to sing and dance and be part of the Hau'oli group. In 1970 we, Auntie Vicky got a call from

George Naope saying that they were interested in doing a Merry Monarch Hula Contest. So he called Aunty Pauline and Aunty Vicky to see whether or not they would be interested to coming to an idea that he was wanting to do a hula competition instead of only what they did when they open the Merry Monarch. At the very beginning it was never a hula contest. (IT WAS LIKE A HO'IKE?) No. It was a craft fair and that kind of a class at, actually I think the third year, that's when George Naope came upon the idea of why not perpetuating the hula, and so they named it the Merry Monarch Hula Festival. And so it came about that we, the competing group, from all the schools that went, from Aunty's group, was the senior senior girls, and that was in 1971. (IS THAT THE TIME YOU CHANGED YOUR HALAU NAME?) No. (IT WAS WAY AFTER?) It was way after, years after. I also would like to mention that it was my pleasure to perform at the Ilikai Hotel with Wendell Silva. Aunty used to have him at the Ilikai Hotel, too, singing. So we kind of all started with her. (IN YOUR HALAU, DO YOU TEACH BOTH KAHIKO AND AUANA?) Yes I do. I teach kahiko, auana, the Maori and the Tahitian. (DO YOU TEACH OLI ALSO?) I teach the oli chant as well as the hula, both. (CAN YOU TELL ME HOW MANY YEARS YOU HAVE BEEN TEACHING?) Let's see, ever since I was 13 years old. So I am now 57. (CAN YOU TELL ME AT WHAT AGE YOU STARTED HULA?) I learned to dance

when I was 2 years old. (YOUR FIRST TEACHER?) Yes. But it came about in kind of an odd way. My mother is a Mormon. Remember Aunty Edith Kanaka'ole? Well her mother was my first teacher. When my mama was pregnant with me, Tutu Kekuewa used to come to Honolulu to Kalihi because she was a temple member and only in Honolulu was there a temple, in La'ie. Not until way later were temples built here and there in the islands. So when she came, my mother was a neighbor of her cousin, Mrs. Louise Kealoha. And so we kind of were raised up right around that area. The 2 homes in Kalihi, in Ola Lane . And Tutu Kekuewa used to go to Horner Street, which was the neighbor right in the back of us 'cause that was her \_\_\_\_\_ . Mama, Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_, Tutu Louise, we used to call her Tutu Lou, and Tutu Kekuewa, they all used to go to La'ie to the temple together. So when she saw that my mom was hapai, she asked for that stomach and that's how I came about. (HOW LONG DID YOU LEARN UNDER HER?) I danced when I was 2 years old, believe it or not. Everybody outside playing when I'm inside dancing. By 2 years old I was sat down to learn how to say the words, how to do expression with my mind and my eyes. No expression with my hands, not yet, until I was 5 years old was I able to get up and hula. (MIND TRAINING FIRST?) Uh huh. When I was 15 years old, Tutu passed away. And from that age I went to Aunty lolani

Luahine and Aunty Lokalia Montgomery for my hula through my daddy, because his two sisters were dancers also from the school of Ka'o'o. So one is Ka'upena's mother, Aunty Emily Wong, and the second one is Ka'ena Kamamo(?), who is the queen of selling the 'Ilima leis, she grows them in her yard. While her mother, which was Ka'ena and Kapu or Cecilia Kapu, that was their names; and he was the only brother, my daddy, which was Robert. (CAN YOU TELL ME A LITTLE BIT OF YOUR TRAINING UNDER YOUR FIRST TEACHER?) When I was 2 years old I did not hula on my feet or my hands. All she trains me was, and I can remember so clearly, that I just sit down and mimic what she is doing. When she talks I had to listen and pay attention. (YOU WERE ALONE?) Just me. Once in awhile Aunty Edith used to come to Honolulu with her mother and then she would dance also, but she would dance standing. I had to sit. And later on I came to realize that that was discipline. If you cannot pay attention and sit there and pay attention then, you know, that's one of the qualities in the hula is discipline first. And because it was a Mormon family, no offense to any other denomination, but because it was a Mormon family we needed to always remember to discipline. And so that came very important in my life when it came to my life. And so later on she showed me what it was to apply the hula and then with applying the hula, with the hands and

sitting. I didn't do, only noho i lalo, only sitting. And with the discipline, after hula, went memorizing of what they wanted us to memorize, or what she wanted me to memorize. I'm saying "they" because Aunty Io and Aunty Lokalia taught the same discipline. (DID SHE TEACH YOU OLI?) Yes. How to oli, what different sounds, what different ways, what's called different things. Of course, I was very young. But with all of these preparations always went prayers. There was never a time we opened dancing or anything pertaining to hula without doing prayer. And that was one thing that I needed to remember and I thank God that I have remembered and I thank him also for that kind of teaching because in my halau today, whether it's the children, the keikis, the seniors, the juniors, or my kupuna, we always open with prayer and close with prayer.

(DID YOU TAKE FROM OTHER KUMU?) Yes. In my modern version of the hula I went to Leilani Alama because she lived right down the street from my daddy and them, which was the old Kalihi Press in Kalihi, the presses. She lived in the back, in one of the lanes, and taught in her aunt's home. I forget what that aunt's name was. She was dedicated to her love of the hula and therefore I learned more discipline with her also. And she was very young. She graduated from school. (SHE WAS PRETTY YOUNG THEN? AFTER LEILANI, DID YOU GO ON TO OTHERS?) Yes. After Leilani I went to

Aunty Sally Naluai. She was Sally Wood Naluai. I still today respect her as my immediate source of the hula, Sally Wood. But in my rearing, until Aunty Lokalia passed away which was, I think, 1983, I continued to dance with her. So the workshop that I was asked to give, that was my pleasure to present, was the chant "Ulei Pahu i ka Moku", That is who I learned it from. (FROM AUNTY SALLY?) No. Aunty Lokalia. Aunty Sally, I learned the ancient as well. I stayed with my ancient as well, and the drum dances I got from Aunty Sally as well. (DID YOU UNIKI?) Yes, with Aunty Lokalia. Aunty Io, no. She didn't uniki any girl. (AUNTY LOKALIA DID?) Aunty Lokalia and Aunty Sally. Leilani Alama, no. Not until, I think, way later, I'm not sure. But I know the girl that danced with me, which was a very big class, did not uniki with her either. (WHAT MADE YOU WANT TO BE A TEACHER?) When my mother and dad moved to Wai'anae, the Lualualei officers' wives wanted to do something with the culture because they, being haole, they didn't know anything about Hawaiiana. They wanted to know about the island, and what better way than to do it with the hula. So when I was 13 years old, through a cousin of mine, Mrs. Fanny Silva, she used to be in the U.E. club, and she was president at that time, I think, for that section, and that included the wives of the Commanders, the officers' wives of Lualualei. So when they mentioned to her that they were

interested in the hula, she put up my name. And so I taught when I was 13 up there until I was 15, because then they changed commanders, and so I went on to other things; and other things was to do goodwill through the Mormon church and travel in the summer time to goodwill at least 28 states every summer so we could sell Hawai'i to the mainlanders, which was very successful. It was through a pageant that we let them know the story of our ancestors.

(WHICH TEACHER HAD THE MOST INFLUENCE ON YOU AND YOUR HALAU?) I think all of them. From all of them I learned many, many things. The most important that stands out in my mind is the respect for the hula. Therefore, I can please the public when I am out in the public eye. The respect for myself as a teacher, but always to remember that humbleness goes with this, because when you have your mind out inside cloud 9, I always say to my children that you will never ever last because all of these good things of the hula, to everyone of my masters as well as me, and the acknowledgement goes to the Lord because he is the one that gives us that talent, and I feel that my talent is a gift from heavenly Father. So I look at it as me being destined to be a hula teacher, otherwise I'd be a darned good secretary.

(CAN YOU DESCRIBE TO ME YOUR DANCING STYLE?) Yes. My dancing



style is, I like to think that I have my own style. And my style is a smooth type of dancing with the oni to the hips and the expression with the body and the hands. I'm sure all halau takes that into consideration, but in the mean time, when they look at me, my most outstanding is my feet. I lift my feet everytime I dance, and that is the "Hau'oli" look. (IS THAT THE HAU'OLI LOOK PUT INTO YOUR OWN STYLE?) No. Aunty Vicky had another style and I never adapted to it because I like the way I do. (SO IT CAME FROM YOURSELF?) Mmhm. I lift my feet all the time when I hula. I lift it high, and I don't know how to explain this but, anyway if somebody sees it and know about the hula they will say, "Oh! That's a Hau'oli." I always suggest to my children or my students that their hands must extend out, never put in the arm. But I'm sure, again, those qualities are insisted upon all kumu hula, because no sense dancing if you can't express your story. So you can't express it with your hands in; it's gotta be out.

(DURING YOUR HULA CAREER, DID YOU ENCOUNTER ANY DIFFICULTIES?)

No, except I encountered a very bad experience which I don't wish for anyone to experience, and that was in the Merry Monarch Hula Contest in the island of Hawai'i, in Hilo, about 1979. I won the perpetual and I am always happy to say that the Hau'oli Hula Halau was the first one to win the ladies perpetual trophy. And that year I lost a girl, Alison

Wahineho'okai. I lost her in a car accident there in Hilo and that was a very bad experience for me. But I thank God again for my family, especially my husband that was there to direct the situation. One girl landed into the hospital, and she lives today. Another boy who Allison went to go pick up with no permission, and I say again that when my kids go to the Merry Monarch, if they don't learn discipline I say there is the door, go home, because when we take them I am responsible. So without them paying attention, which she didn't, and wanting to have Greg come to her at our little party that we had because we won, and so everybody's so happy. But having no permission to go to the Hilo Lagoon to pick up Greg, coming back to us she encountered a bad thing which killed her and that is an experience that I shall never forget. But it has also made me strong in other ways to know that, again, what I was taught as a little girl, that discipline is very important. If you don't listen, bad things can happen. This is one of the examples. And another thing that I experienced that's really threatening to me, and I kind of left the hula for a while, was the death of my baby. (YOU LEFT THE HULA FOR A WHILE?) I left the hula. And I just went into seclusion. She danced too. But, of course, after resting for about 4 1/2 years, I am kind of back into the competition world again. Last year, 1990, I took a group to Hayward and enjoyed it tremendously.

And the outcome of that competition was very satisfying.

(WHAT KIND OF JOY DO YOU HAVE IN YOUR TEACHING TODAY?) Well, first of all, I am able to share the hula with the kupunas, and these ladies have never danced in their lives. But it takes a certain tact to keep them occupied and interested, and that challenge is a wonderful challenge for me. (AND THESE KUPUNA ARE FROM THE WAI'ANAE COAST?) Right. And I teach every Tuesday and Thursday. I enjoy tremendously.

(WHAT IS YOUR GREATEST ACCOMPLISHMENT IN YOUR HULA CAREER?) That I have been able to train one ~~per~~ person, Twyla Ululani Mendez. That she is now with an award of a Miss Hula in the hula world, 1984 Miss Hula, and another daughter who follows the same foot steps lives in Hilo, Cheryl Nelson. Through competitions that she has been in and helped to win, she now has a show group of her own. (SHE WAS ALOHA HULA IN WHEN?) That was Twyla. (OH, THAT WAS TWYLA.) (HUSBAND-"1st televised Miss Hula contest) Twyla was Miss Hula in 1984. . .

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. . .and that was the first televised for any Miss Hula Competition.

So, again, it was an exceptional year for us. (SO YOU HAVE 2 DAUGHTERS IN THE HULA?) Yes. . .

(WHAT DO YOU THINK OF HULA KAHIKO TODAY?) Well, I don't want to

be critical because I understand that as years go by there is things that is inserted, maybe no fault of theirs, or just because a certain individual wants to be more creative. But I think that some of these hula, kumus, that call themselves such, I think that they don't have the roots that they should call themselves kumu hulas. I see a lot of styles that doesn't belong to them but they say it is their's. And how can we be, we can be creative if we are creative in our own honest way. But there has been a lot of times where I see, in competition especially, a style of Johnny, a style of Louise Kaleiki, a style of Leilani Mendez, a style of Darrell Lupenui, you know? (INCORPORATING THEIR OWN.) Right, in their own. And so I look at that and I am disappointed that they are given the free agency to create but they have the gall, I use that word not to hurt anyone, but they have the gall to call themselves kumu hula; but they are not been creative in their own personal way. (WHAT IS YOUR DEFINITION OF HULA KAHIKO?) Hula kahiko is a sacred form of an art of hula that is motivated by the student of the kahiko learning from the master that she or he has learned from, that speaks of, oh, I want to say so many things. It's a special form of art that was passed down from generations that should be applied as such. . . . (DO YOU COMPOSE CHANTS?) No I don't. (DO YOU PREFER HULA KAHIKO OR HULA AUANA?) I prefer kahiko, and if I win in any

competition it is the kahiko that I want to win. If I win the auana I am thankful, but to me, my roots must come from there. And so I've taught all my students the same thing. I say, "If we win the auana, I am thankful, but when we win the kahiko, I am more than joyful." (DO YOU HAVE A FAVORITE CHANT IN KAHIKO?) One of my favorites is "U Lei Pahu", (I TA MOTU?) Mmhm. (AND DO YOU LIKE THE CHANT ITSELF OR THE DANCE AND THE CHANT?) I like...and "Kewelina Mai Nei". (DID YOU LEARN "KEWELINA" WITH AUNTY EDITH?) No. I learned that from Aunty Edith's mother. Maybe not the hands, but the feet because that was the most important. Hands were never in existence until later. (DO YOU THINK HAWAIIAN LANGUAGE IS IMPORTANT IN A HULA?) Oh yes! Definitely, especially for the children today. When it was my day and age, we were raised around Hawaiian speaking. It was never a time that you sit on the tables out of prayer and after that they say in Hawaiian, "Pass the sugar, pass the coffee, pass the tea, pass the spoon, pass the meat," you know, all in Hawaiian. So therefore, as much as I'm ashamed to say that I don't converse in the Hawaiian language, but... (SO YOU WERE AWARE?) ...I know what they are talking about, it's just I cannot answer them back. But that I will soon be graduating some.

(WHO DO YOU CONSIDER HULA MASTERS?) Even if they're passed on?

learn about their culture. And to put it, to put my culture into practice, they are so proud because the Japanese are very serious about their culture. (ARE YOU GOING TO MERRY MONARCH THIS YEAR?) Yes I am. (ARE YOU GOING TO PERFORM?) Not perform. (JUST TO LOOK?) Mmhm. (YOU WERE SAYING THAT YOU DO OTHER DANCES LIKE MAORI AND TAHITIAN. DO YOU GIVE CLASSES FOR THEM?) Yes. I will give to my students, but I will not take special people for special classes, no, only to my students. (WHY?) There are special ones available. (DO YOU TAKE THEM TO PERFORM OTHER THAN HULA?) Well, when they perform, I compile it and call it the Polynesian dance. But the one specific dance, the only time I did that was, three years ago. You remember the book, "Mutiny on the Bounty"? The daughter of the author of that book saw me perform at a performance in Hilo. I was covering for some hotels; they needed to go on vacation and take a break. So I accepted and I put the Polynesian show together, and she was there present and she saw the performance and she liked it. So she hired me and my group to do an all-Tahitian performance for the Kahilu Theatre in Waimea; that's where they were going to have their performance. And she wanted me to go back to 1928. And so I serched together with Tetu Kame'enui, and at that time he lived in my home. And we put on a performance from 1928 to today, three years ago. And what

was fulfilling in that performance is at the very end there was a standing ovation. And so I said to Tetu, performers, and Joe, and I said to myself too, "I thank the Lord that we have roots, that we are able to have the patience to go search that day and age and bring it back up to today and compile this together," because it was a standing ovation. And the daughter of the author of that book was there to be at that performance. So it made me happy. And never mind if I am a Hawaiian. I truly feel that I am a cousin of. . . (WE ARE ALL POLYNESIAN.) Yes. (AND YOUR CHILDREN ARE ALL DIFFERENT AGES IN YOUR POLYNESIAN SHOW?) Mhm. I don't attempt to teach my keikis at all, because I feel that I'm not an authority that way. But when they are of senior age, where they can look at an overall picture of a Tahiti step, then I will attempt to teach them. But anything younger, I am not an authority so I feel that I am in the wrong grounds. But in Hawaiiiana I teach them if they're 3 years old and if they're exceptional students I will take them at that age. But authority wise on Tahiti, No. (SOMETHING SPECIAL YOU WANT TO SAY?) Well, I just want to say "thank you" for pressing the issue that I am able to sit here today with you and my husband to speak about my one love which is first heavenly father; second, Joe; and third, my hula. I always say that.

(TWO YEARS AGO YOU CHANGED YOUR HALAU'S NAME?) I changed my

halau name from the "Hau'oli Hula Halau" to, at present, "Ka Mele Hula O Na Ku'u Pu'uwai". My mother kind of helped me with changing it to this. I named this name for the first tape recording that I did. "Ka Mele O Na Ku'u Pu'uwai" was the tape recording name. I put "Hula" so it's "Songs and Dances of My Heart". That was in 1988. (AND YOUR RECORDING CAME OUT AT ABOUT THAT YEAR?) 1988 it came out. So as of present, my name is "Ka Mele Hula O Na Ku'u Pu'uwai". I almost forgot to mention that.

1950, 51 and 52, Aunty Edith McKinzie was my hula teacher. And she taught in the old Catholic church hall in Wai'anae. When she came back from Guam, she came to see me at "Steamboats" night club in Waikiki and she said, "Hey, what's happening now?" And I said, "You know what? We need you so badly here." And then, oh, I heard she was dancing with Aunty Hoakalei. Oh! Then I heard that she was at the University. Oh! Then I heard, Keoni called me, "Guess who's my teacher?" And I said, "Who?" "Aunty Edith McKinzie." I said, "Oh my gosh, how wonderful."



(EVEN IF THEY'RE PASSED ON.) Aunty Io, Aunty Lokalia, and Tutu. And I think that Aunty Edith Kanaka'ole is a very, very high regarding job in her era. (ANY OTHERS THAT ARE STILL LIVING?) Aunty Sally and also Mrs. Zuttermeister. (BESIDE HULA, ARE YOU INVOLVED IN OTHER ACTIVITIES?) I am an entertainer/musician and that's my life. But the hula, if my students are unable to pay it doesn't matter to me. I have them dance anyway because if they are ono to come and seek me out, then there must be a reason for it. So if they have the money, they don't have the money, it's okay. But at the present I charge for my hula, and the fee is 23 dollars a month, two times a week, not any more. And people think that I am crazy, but I feel that it isn't the money we need to keep my culture alive but it is us. . .

(WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT WORKSHOPS IN HULA?) I think that's a wonderful idea. (DO YOU SEE IT AS FOR KUMU HULA, OR KIDS, OR BOTH?) Both, because, like I said, a lot of them call themselves kumu hulas but they don't know anything, and they need to latch on to the masters of today, like George Naope, you know? He has lots and lots to offer. Aunty Zuttermeister, Aunty Sally, they have lots of knowledge to give us. Aunty Lani Kalama. They are - Aunty Sally, Lani, Maiki - they are my senior sisters. When I came into the class they were graduated, but I sat in their

graduation by invitation of my kumu which was their kumu, Aunty Lokalia, who uniki them. And there I was able to see the real thing and be in that uniki in my own time. (IT IS GOOD FOR CHILDREN TODAY TO HAVE THESE PEOPLE THEY CAN LOOK UP TO. THEY HAVE TO LEARN THEIR ROOTS FROM SOMEWHERE.) And some of them are willing to; some, maybe they hilahila; some of them, maybe, they just don't care. Sometimes my daughter says to me, "Well, Mom, I had a conversation with so and so, and they said to me, 'Well, we don't care about the roots. We're dancing and today is today.'" And I said, "You know what, Ulu? Until the day I die, I will preach to you and to your sister and your 2 brothers", they dance hula too, "that the hula is roots." (IT'S A CULTURE. YOU LOSE YOUR CULTURE IF YOU LOSE YOUR ROOTS.) That's right! So they agree with me, and what is satisfying to me is they agree with me and when they teach it, they do the same principles. They apply the same way.

(WHAT KIND OF ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO SOMEONE WHO WANTS TO BE A KUMU HULA?) Look into the hula. Take it seriously. Search for those that know because they are here and I'm sure they would be glad to offer classes to them. Now that we are still lucky in this day and age to have the kumus alive, search for them; go look to them; go talk to them; learn from them; sit down with them; talk to them. We didn't hula until we

talked, we understood, we ate it, we digested it, we slept with it, and tomorrow we do again. And too, in the ancient way when you come into the house of the hula, you come in and you have to ask permission of the kumu hula. Today you come in wearing your dirty clothes, dirty shoes. Not them. We come in, we have to ask permission, and how? We have to ask with our oli. We had to chant our way in, and then we are able to come in.

(DO YOU LIKE TO BE A JUDGE?) It was my thrill because, not because I was there, but because I was able to express myself to see which one of them applied the steps to the drums, applied the steps to the ipu correctly. (AND THIS WAS WHERE, AT "IA 'OE E KA LA"?) No, at the Merry Monarch. I was asked two or three times. And then in Kona for the "Na Kamalei", Uncle George and Miss Na Kamalei. And so that gave me a broader look to look at the kupunas to say, "Hey, there's hope here too. Share with them," not because they are old, that don't mean they don't know, but as I have not learned anything from the hula as far as my kupunas are concerned, but I have learned of life, of happiness. How they experienced their life, I have come to learn about their stories, how hard they were, how hard their parents were. And it fills me with joy because it broadens me. I appreciate more. (AND IT IS PART OF THE CULTURE TO LEARN.) Right. And too, I have Japanese people that I teach also, and I