

Carolee Nishi

Carolee Nishi has been a volunteer instructor for the Nu'uaniu YMCA Hawaiiana Youth Program for over twenty years. Besides working full time for United Airlines as a concierge, she is a kupuna for the Department of Education Hawaiian Studies Program and works parttime at Liberty House.

My first student was my friend's daughter who was attending the Kapunahala Elementary School. She and four other girls became my students in 1969. When we were invited to participate in the Expo '70 in Osaka, we were asked the name of our group. I said that we did not have a name, so they asked from what village we came from. I said we came from Kapunahala in Kane'ohe and so they made us cards with the name "Kapunahala Hula Club". When I got home, a fellow worker published cards for us and changed the word "club" to "Hui". He asked what kind of hui and I replied a hula group. That's how we became known as the Hula Hui O Kapunahala.

I was five or six years old when I started hula. My mom thought it was cute if her daughter could dance the hula. My sister and I first learned from Eunice McLean in Kalihi. We were not taught the words to the dances, we were just given a 78 record. My mother would put it on and we would practice to the records. I went there every week and I enjoyed it tremendously.

After taking some hula at the YWCA, I went to Lillian Yamabe in Kaimuki and I stayed with her for quite awhile. We entertained a lot in those days. Genoa Keawe, Pua Alameida and Johnny Alameida were our musicians. Lillian always used me for her soloist.

In the 1950's, my parents had a saimin stand in the International Market Place and I learned a lot from the people who used to hang around there. I was really influenced by entertainers like Mamo Howell who danced at Don the Beachcomber. I went to Bella Richards, who was a very serious Tahitian teacher, and Kuchi Kuhns, the comic hula dancer at Don the Beachcomber. Anything that was taught to me, I learned it. I sat in the shows every day for years, watching the hula, the Maori dances and listening to the same old drumming over and

over. It became a part of me.

My father never allowed me to dance professionally, only as a hobby. When Gloria, the daughter of my hula teacher, asked me to go to a Lexington Hotel for a six-week engagement, I was so happy. Because I was graduating from high school, I thought I would be able to dance professionally. My mom was all for it, but my father said that unless I graduate from college, he would not think of letting me go. There was resentment because I wasn't allowed to go, but I was not defensive and I did not sit at home and cry. I just continued to do hula on my own.

I took all kinds of lessons. Leimomi Chun taught me Maori and Tahitian. As I got older, I was involved with people like Hu'i Park and Kawai Cockett. I learned kahiko from Ho'oulu Cambra and language from Larry Lindsey Kimura at the University of Hawai'i. I also sang with Dorothy Kahananui Gillette and did a lot of kahiko with her ensemble.

During the seventies, I got to know Genoa Keawe really well and we became close friends. Genoa taught me how to play the 'ukulele over and above what my dad taught me. I knew the basics but it was Genoa who taught me d7, g7 and we used to play by ear. We lived in Kailua and it took us almost two hours down the winding road to reach home. So we had an hour and a half of singing and playing 'ukulele on the way.

Aunty Alice Namakelua taught language, slack key and mele for one hour each Tuesday and Thursday night at Genoa Keawe's studio. I was there for all three classes and I learned a great deal at that time.

My friend's brother, Robert Matsuda, was the head of YMCA, internationally. He told me that working for United Airlines was one of the more unimpressive things I did and asked if I would volunteer for his organization to help out the youth group. I was brought in to teach at the YMCA and my girls from Kapunahala came with me.

My students start with kahiko. They don't learn any 'auana for a year or two. We start

with the steps and we start to sing. We always sing songs that have to do with the monarch and after they accomplish about four songs on Lili'u and four songs on Kawika, we go into some Pele chants. In chanting, we teach them to understand voice control as opposed to just singing a song.

My older students stay and volunteer to teach the rest of the kids at the YMCA. They keep passing on what they know. Right now I have three very strong kumu kokua. First of all, more than how well they know hula, I require that they have an open heart to give. They have to learn to share sincerely and not think of themselves. In order to learn, you must be focused on yourself and not waste energy on what the other people are doing. If you sincerely focus on yourself, you will learn clearly. After they have learned, they can share it because they have a very good, strong knowledge. But unless these girls learn how to listen and focus, they cannot teach back.

I will never graduate anybody. I never graduated myself. I don't think there is an end to learning because there is so much to learn. My feeling is that you will never know all. There is no one who knows it all, but there are some that have more knowledge than others. I definitely respect all those who have done a great deal of work within the field.

I don't think hula has changed as much as it's become popular and more polished and perfected. It is getting a little bit too critical because there are so many segments and everybody is saying, "this is right, that's wrong.". Who's to say that's right and that's wrong? We have judges and they are the ones to judge. We are all personally involved in perpetuating the hula, not to waste our energy saying who is right and who is wrong.

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