

Elizabeth Hu'i Park

Back in 1959, there were ten of us who danced for Aunty Vicki li Rodrigues. We were the best dancers on the Islands. We were the Hauoli Girls and we entertained in the hotels and on the boats during the 1960's.

I learned the basics of hula at the age of eight years while attending the Parks and Recreation program at Lanakila Park. I continued every summer and then during the weekdays, I took hula 'auana from Aunty Sally Wood (Naluai) at Likelike School. Then for the next fourteen years, I learned hula kahiko and hula 'auana from Joseph Kahaulilio.

There were about 15 girls in Uncle Joe's class. He would always tell us the story and translation of the chant before teaching us the dance. We had to learn the chant only by memory. Uncle Joe would teach us the words first, then he would go into the basic steps and hand motions. Uncle Joe taught just four of us to pa'i. I was one of the four and that's how I learned to pa'i with my finger and thumb.

After Uncle Joe left, I danced for Leilani Alama for a year and a half before my cousin Flo asked me to dance for Aunty Vicki li Rodrigues because she needed girls for her show. Aunty Vicki would do the 'auana portion of the show and Uncle Joe, Kawai Cockett or George Holokai would do the chanting for the kahiko. Aunty Vicki's forte was hula 'auana. That's why she took dancers who already knew kahiko or my cousin and I would teach the dance to the other girls.

Like Uncle Joe, Aunty Vicki didn't allow us to copy the words to the song she was teaching. But I wrote it anyway because when you get older, you forget. She told us what the dance was about and let everybody have an input in putting the motions to the dance. We would try it this way or try it that way. She knew just who would become teachers and carry on.

Aunty Vicki has given me so much. She instilled in me to grow as a person and taught me to be a lady. She polished us to be beautiful hula dancers. But although I danced for Aunty Vicki for seventeen years, my style of dancing is still Joe Kahaulilio's and Aunty Vicki was pleased with me for keeping his styling.

I didn't realize that I was going to be a teacher until Aunty Genoa Keawe asked me to teach hula for her at her recording studio. I told her, "Oh no, I don't think I want to ." I had just quit my job to help my daughter take care of her baby when Aunty Genoa asked me again. So I said yes. In 1974, I started to teach for the Genoa Keawe's Hula Studio at Kaneali'i and the second year, she turned it over to me. I've been teaching since then.

I don't believe in 'uniki and my teachers never believed in 'uniki. In the old days, you had to live with the kumu. You had to abstain from sex, and only concentrate in learning the hula. I remember Eleanor Hiram Hoke telling stories about her 'uniki and we cannot go through those rituals anymore.

On my 15th anniversary of teaching, I graduated six students who have been with me from 10 to 15 years and they were given a certificate of accomplishment. For five years they had to teach the basics to a beginners class. Then I gave them a hapa haole number to create into a hula. Before every girl graduated, she had to earn a paper certifying that she knows how to make a ti leaf skirt, a haku lei, ku'i lei, and can do everything I taught them.

My joy is having the respect and dedication of a student who I taught to become an accomplished dancer. She is my final product. It's a feather in my cap when someone else wants my students and I feel great that they can go on to other things.

There's so much creativity in teachers now. I think kahiko is telling stories through a slower medium. I like it. Because I teach only girls, my kahiko is soft like I was taught from the very beginning at Lanakila Park.

Hula masters should know everything about the hula and what goes with the hula. So many people are proclaimed hula masters nowadays and you don't remember them from the days when you were dancing. All of a sudden they're a hula master. I feel if you did the work yourself, someday you will become a hula master.

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