

ALOHA AMBASSADOR

Carolee Nishi, a school teacher and executive services director for United Airlines, puts her students in touch with their Hawaiian heritage through dance and music and makes customers feel at ease with her aloha spirit.

Humankind does not live by pager alone, but Carolee Nishi does. Between a part-time job in retail, several teaching assignments, and her work with United Airlines, Nishi's whirlwind schedule keeps her constantly moving.

Most afternoons Nishi can be seen at the airport welcoming customers and answering their questions about everything from seat assignments to the best local restaurants. For 28 years, Nishi has served United's frequent fliers in a capacity that is part ticket agent, part concierge, and part best friend.

The rest of her time is spent sharing her love of Hawaiian song, dance, and language with the children of the islands. Nishi is the creator and volunteer director of a unique after-school program sponsored by the YMCA of Honolulu that teaches Hawaiian Studies to children ages 4–14.

"As soon as school is out, the children are ours," says Nishi. "We teach five courses of study including ancient and modern hula dancing, Hawaiian language, ukulele and Hawaiian songs, island crafts, and history and culture."

More than just a *kumu hula* (hula teacher), Nishi is a guide, introducing children to their cultural roots and the stories of their ancestors—stories that predate written language.

"Until the Christian missionaries came to Hawai'i, there was no written language," says Nishi. "History was passed down from generation to generation through dance and song. By teaching our island children the Hawaiian culture and language, we can instill in them a deep pride in their heritage while still being Americans and appreciating the diversity of all the ethnic cultures on our islands.

"A lot of people come to Hawai'i, but they really don't



Carolee Nishi
Executive Services Director, Honolulu

know a great deal about the islands," Nishi continues. "So much of what they experience is very commercial and has little to do with authentic Hawaiian culture. But it's not a problem because there are people like me here who want to teach them. I've been welcoming our customers to the islands for 28 years, and I believe my job is to make sure that the authentic part of our culture is maintained."

Nishi started teaching hula in San Francisco in the '60s to keep busy while her husband served in the Vietnam War. She gained inspiration through the achievements of her students, many of

whom had special needs or were new immigrants. Even now, unlike many professional *halaus* (hula studios) that take on only the most gifted dancers, Nishi's program includes any child who is willing to learn.

"Over the years, we have built solid foundations for many of these children, and they've grown up to be constructive members of society," says Nishi. "If you start them young, you can help give them a positive direction in life. Hawai'i is a very small place, and it's important that they learn to help preserve our island treasures."

Nishi was herself honored as an Island treasure last year, becoming Hawai'i's Jefferson Award designee. The Jefferson Awards, sponsored by the American Institute for Public Service, honor the achievements of those who make significant contributions to the field of public and community service.

If you want to learn more about things truly Hawaiian, look for Carolee Nishi the next time you're in Honolulu. For United Airlines and her community, she embodies the spirit of aloha—a word that means love, kindness, consideration, humility, harmony, welcome, and much more. ❁