On the edge of urban Honolulu, Kalihi is home to diverse cultural groups struggling to cope with poverty and colonization. This is the story of their journey to reclaim their rich cultural roots in a world that often sees them as troublesome statistics.

The Children of Kalihi

Dawn Mahi

In the field behind the school, a group of at least 10, sometimes 20, young kids who are cutting class sit in a circle and keep watch. If anyone approaches, especially cops, they scatter to the wind. In a community of 30,000, they are alone.

The principal and other community leaders are at their wits' end. "This is the newest group of immigrants we have had in a long line. But this time, we just do not know what to do." Sometimes the kids do drugs under the nearby bridge; sometimes they disrupt classrooms with stony eyes, turning over desks before walking out defiantly.

This is Kalihi, named from the Hawai'ian *Kalihi* or "the edge." This community bordering urban Honolulu is the ancestral home of gods and sacred mountains, a gateway of hope for so many immigrants who come to Hawai'i from the Pacific and Asia. It is an ancient place, full of histories, struggles, and strengths that date back to a time when the people of the Pacific Ocean, the largest cultural diaspora on earth, were not separated by modern day political boundaries (O'toko, 2012).

Measuring Disparity

Community demographics here in the microcosm fluctuate depending on the socio-political situations in the Pacific Rim. Native Hawai'ians, Pacific Islanders, and Asians currently comprise 93% of valley residents, and in 2011, 37% percent of Kalihi Valley residents were foreign-born, compared to 18% statewide and 13% nationwide (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011a; U.S. Census Bureau, 2011b).

Today, many of our youth are disconnected from both homeland and home, ashamed of their origins as well as their zip code. Stuck between two worlds, they are living examples of assimilation

and colonization (Akeo et al., 2008; Okamoto et al., 2008). Nearly three-fourths of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch; one school reports a rate of 96% (Hawai'i Department of Education Data, 2013). They live in the most dense and diverse community in the state, one of the areas with the lowest income. Economics, health statistics, and a pervasively negative reputation tell what many in Hawai'i assume: Kalihi will fail.

We measure what we value, and health and wellness outcomes are vital (Liu & Alameda, 2011; Marmot, 2007). But dissecting the daily grind of poverty and colonization through statistics proves what Kalihi already knows: life is difficult. Disparities research ties health and well-being to our ethnicity and cultural heritage. This feeds the notion that our problems come from what we cannot change—our accent, our skin color, and our identity as human beings. The lack of perspective makes it easy to blame those who experience inequity: If Kalihi kids just worked harder, tried harder, made better choices, spoke proper English, or were simply more successful, the community would be a better place.

Caught between two worlds and afloat in the sea of modern society, we look for clues that will help us find safe harbor.

While statistics can be used for policy change and resource reallocation, the data highlights Kalihi's vulnerability and masks its strengths. Families in crisis cannot help but feel a sense of impotence facing forces that seem far beyond their control (Lei Hīpu'u Focus Group, 2010). But these measures of disparity ignore the history that impacted choices made by our ancestors and shaped who we are today.

A New Story

If you want to change a society, then you have to tell an alternative story.

~Ivan Illich

Thankfully, this narrative of numbers is not the only story. The citizens of Kalihi are descendants of the liquid nation, the Pacific Ocean. We have our own determinants of health; we have our own values and stories of our struggles to break free (Kaholokula, 2011; Liu & Alameda, 2011; Meyer, 1998). Our ancestors traveled the wide blue expanses on large voyaging canoes, navigating by the stars. Their imaginations were infinite and necessary for the survival of the people. We are warriors, leaders, innovators, farmers, fishers, artisans, experts in conservation, healers, spiritually rich, descendants of the 'āina—the land—that feeds and nurtures us, and whom we must in turn feed and nurture to sustain the generations to come (Holmes, 2000).

Cultures across Oceania were not homogenous, but they were deeply inter-related (Linnekin & Poyer, 1990). In our ancient story, children are taught that they have responsibilities to contribute to the well-being of the community. Competence is measured not by abstract concepts but by the ability to help start the morning cooking fire, fetch water, or contribute in other ways (Lei Hīpu'u Focus Group, 2010). Reciprocity is the loving law of survival. Youth are carefully observed and their gifts cherished. From an early age, talents are nurtured through apprenticeships into specialties that benefit everyone and ensure cultural continuity (F. Dudoit-Tagupa, personal communication, March 20, 2012; I. S. Kikku, personal communication, November 25, 2008).

In contrast, today in Kalihi there are children as young as five who get themselves to school every morning without adult support (Linapuni School, 2012). The challenges of modernity break the cultural integrity of family systems (Jolly & Macintyre, 1989). Without proper support and often confronting racism and other challenges, children may not feel capable, useful, or have positive connections to their heritage (Mayeno, Kaholokula, Liu, Asato, & Tseng, 2011; Werner, 1993).

Since we are island people and ancestral cousins, it is assumed that everyone has experience with the modern colonized world and the United States. However, for many, the fast-paced life on O'ahu and in Kalihi is bewildering and new. Western values such as individualism, the commodification of nature, monotheism, consumerism, and capitalism are offered as a path toward success. But this often conflicts with the interdependent, land-based values that have ensured the integrity of families for centuries (Lei Hīpu'u Focus Group, 2010).

Caught between two worlds and afloat in the sea of modern society, we look for clues that will help us find safe harbor. An ancient voyaging perspective can help. In order to reach their destination,

our ancestors had to be able to see the island they were looking for in the midst of the deep blue ocean. "You have to bring the island to you," they said, meaning that we must be able to envision our future in order to reach it, and indeed pull it up out of the ocean to meet us (Anthony, 2012; Kuamo'o-Henry, 2013). It is not just about going after what we want, but bringing our goals closer with the innate confidence that we will achieve them, that we deserve them. However, understandings of success differ between European definitions and our own, so we must navigate a middle path.

Recent studies have shown that social capital is the largest determinant of health—more than access to medical care, genetics, and other factors (Portes, 2000). This refers to the network of support a person has in life, a sense of resiliency and ability to contextualize and feel empowered to solve whatever challenges may come his or her way—in health and otherwise. Social capital in Kalihi includes our relationship-based systems of social support, storytelling, connection to the land, and honoring of elders and ancestors.

Neighbors being Neighborly

In 1972, a handful of community volunteers and a local pastor came together under the simple auspices of helping their neighbors and loving Kalihi, their community. They sought to build interwoven circles of belonging. Highly energized "aunties" went door to door, asked neighbors if they needed assistance, and connected people to resources. Their actions broke down the barriers that prevent Pacific cousins from sharing the figurative communal cooking fire so common to many of our ancestors.

Understandings of success differ between European definitions and our own, so we must navigate a middle path.

From this initial outreach born from love and dedication, a volunteer dental clinic was set up in donated military trailers. This eventually grew into a federally-qualified community health center with nine sites across the sacred land of Kalihi. Each year 10,000 patients and as many volunteers are involved in medical, dental, behavioral health, maternal child health, and a host of other clinical and social service programs serving all ages.

While we need access to clinical services, to be truly healthy, we also need much more. At Kokua Kalihi Valley's (KKV) Ho'oulu 'Āina Nature Preserve, "the breath of the land is the life of the people." There, youth reclaim their heritage by working the land and helping to grow food in community gardens. They learn to cook for their families and to love vegetables. They master traditional skills of native agroreforestry. Each weed they pull becomes fertilizer for native species as they help the forest return to its roots. As native species once again grow on the land, so do positive identities and ancient ways of knowing (Trinidad, 2012). The importance of these simple interactions of reciprocal giving between youth and nature cannot be overstated.

It has not been that long since our ancestors lived in concert with the land. Captain Cook first made landfall in Hawai'i in 1776, and the monarchy was overthrown in 1893 (Kawakami, 1999). Being so isolated, the cousins of the Liquid Nation have similar stories of recent conquest, domination, and infiltration by Eastern and Western colonizers seeking to dominate the politically strategic regions (Linnekin, 1990). Many parents and most grandparents recall childhoods tied to the land, though since living in Hawai'i this important connection has been diminished for many (KKV Comprehensive Family Services Focus Group, 2010).

In making a space for everyone to connect, Ho'oulu 'Āina Nature Preserve "feels like home" to so many of the thousands of volunteers who visit every year from all over the world. The 'āina is the only member of the family present from generation to generation. Under the sacred peak Kilohana at the back of the valley, home of Papahānaumoku and Wākea who are our earth mother and sky father, we learn that we are not alone. Papahānaumoku is holding us, never judging, providing a safe path by which we can connect to our cultural practices and traditions and celebrate them (Kamahele, 2000). She provides an opportunity, through turning hands to the soil, to reclaim the sacred in our lives that has become so endangered. No matter what happens, we can be sources of unconditional love through gratitude and connection to the 'āina, our grandmother.

Concretely, this means a place for growing food, making medicine, building social connections, taking care of ancient walls, exercising, giving and receiving mentorship, and restoring the forest and ourselves. Spiritually, it provides a place where all people can hear the voices of their ancestors on the wind and make a space inside for growth and regeneration. It helps us to "come home."

The Hawai'ian Lei

He Lei Poina 'Ole Ke Keiki (A lei never forgotten is the beloved child; Pukui, 2001)

The Lei Hīpu'u o Kalihi Collaborative is another program of KKV that is working to support youth, with a special focus on young children. The program is named after a Hawai'ian lei made with interwoven, interdependent knotted leaves. The lei signifies the importance of the community to come together with common goals in order for all children to be successful and thrive.

Our approach then is not prevention...but connection, which speaks of infinite potential.

Lei Hīpu'u conducted focus groups and interviews with Hawai'ian, Samoan, Chuukese, and Ilokano community members in order to understand cultural values related to childrearing. We found that families want their children to grow up to be healthy and successful, and that parents have many gifts to pass on. However, time is moving quickly. In some cases, the generations are slowly losing connections to the language, practices, and values of their ancestors and feel that this is leading to a loss of youth identity, pride, and purpose. Families want to spend more time with each other, celebrating their strengths and sharing gifts, but parents are in survival mode and do not have much time (Lei Hīpu'u Focus Group, 2010).

Families shared that the structure of services for families is often confusing and siloed. In response to this, the Collaborative began holding monthly meetings for area service providers in 2009 that continue to this day. The goal of the meetings is to improve collaboration and service delivery. The community also requested a One-Stop Shop where wraparound services could be easily accessed in one place. The Lei Hīpu'u collaborative is working to provide this resource with Linapuni School in Hawai'i's largest public housing project, Kuhiō Park Terrace.

At the school, 2013 Hawai'i State School Readiness Assessment data shows that approximately 80% of students who participated in their early childhood program improved their kindergarten readiness versus 20% who did not participate in an early childhood program. In the school year 2012-2013, Linapuni's pre-kindergarten program was able to offer families in the community access to a quality early childhood program prior to entering kindergarten to approximately 60 out of 100 students (Hawai'i Department of Education Data, 2013).

These continuing efforts will be complemented with coordinated partner services offered on site or in the vicinity such as a free legal advocacy clinic, positive deviance-based parental support programs, public health nursing students to provide outreach and follow up, a pediatrician across the street to help with routine health screenings and follow up, plus regular workshops and learning opportunities on topics of interest to families.

Connecting with Children

The children playing hooky outside the school feel that they are alone. As community leaders and parents come together to improve their situation—their future—it is our job to reach out, connect, and not judge. The Lei Hīpu'u One-Stop Shop Collaborative and Ho'oulu 'Āina Nature Preserve are just two strengths-based approaches to address challenges our community is facing (Kana'iaupuni, 2005).

Our approach then is not prevention, which assumes inevitability, but connection, which speaks of infinite potential. Like the peak Kilohana, which means the best or a vantage point from which to gain true perspective, in Kalihi we see the best: Our children are the best we have to show; we will work together to heal our wounds and not pass them on. By looking to the past and the wisdom of our ancestors and recognizing our gifts, we can help them navigate their way to a brighter future.

Dawn Mahi *is the Lei Hīpu'u Coordinator at Kokua Kalihi Valley Comprehensive Services in Honolulu, Hawaii. She can be contacted by email at* dmahi@kkv.net

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