

KEEPING THE LANGUAGE ALIVE

I ka 'ōlelo nō ke ola, I ka 'ōlelo nō ka make.

– LIFE IS IN SPEECH; DEATH IS IN SPEECH.

Five Kamehameha Schools graduates are helping to perpetuate Hawaiian culture, serving as Hawaiian language instructors at the University of Hawai'i

Some would say that language is the essence of a culture.

Over the years, *ka'ōlelo Hawai'i* (the Hawaiian language) has struggled to stay alive. But today, in the 21st century, the Hawaiian language still lives – within those who teach it, and those who learn and practice it.

Five Kamehameha Schools graduates are currently involved in teaching Hawaiian

language at the University of Hawai'i. Though their teaching methods and ideas may vary, their life's work is all for the sake of preserving the language.

The five graduates are **Katrina-Ann Kapā'anaokalāoikeola Oliveira '92**, **Dr. Sam No'eau Warner '72**, **Naomi Clark Losch '63**, **Richard Keao NeSmith '77** and **Uilani Bobbitt '88**. Warner and Losch are assistant professors with the Hawaiian and Indo-Pacific Languages and Literatures department. NeSmith and Bobbitt are lecturers and Oliveira is an instructor.

"We all believe we didn't choose this profession," Oliveira said. "This was set up by our *kūpuna*. They were the ones guiding us, so we have this *kuleana* to do well.

"We want to make sure that we prepare the next generation. When they become teachers, we will be the ones who taught them. *I hewa ka haumāna i ke kumu* (Students' mistakes are a reflection of their teacher)."

In her sixth year teaching at Mānoa, Oliveira began learning Hawaiian while a student at Kamehameha. She has earned a bachelor's in both Hawaiian Studies and Hawaiian language, as well as a master's degree in cultural geography with a focus on Hawaiian place names.

"Kamehameha helped me become more confident," she said. "And what I notice among my students from Kamehameha is that they feel very comfortable speaking Hawaiian. They may make a few mistakes here and there, but they are not afraid to make mistakes. We usually have to draw that quality out from our other students."

Warner said instructors need to not only

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– Naomi Losch



Naomi Losch has been teaching the Hawaiian language to students for more than 30 years.

be strong speakers, but have strong teaching skills as well. And, like Oliveira – his former student – Warner has no doubts about the ability of Hawaiian students to pick the language up.

“I believe that our people are brilliant,” he said. “They can learn everything.”

Warner’s interest in Hawaiian language sparked while attending the University of Hawai‘i, and he eventually earned a bachelor’s in Hawaiian language and then went on to earn a doctorate in education. Today, he continues research on improving the quality of Hawaiian language education.

Warner said language and culture are intertwined. “I teach you the language so that we can do things in the culture together. We need to teach more aspects of ‘Hawaiianess’ – language is just a part of it. We really need people who are trying to help our Hawaiian people to be whole again.”

Hawaiian language has always been a part of NeSmith’s life, with his grandmother sharing the language with him before any school ever did. He has taught at UH-Hilo and began his teaching career at Mānoa in 1997.

NeSmith’s relationship with his grandmother taught him the value and importance of *mānaleo* (native speakers) in learning Hawaiian. He saved old and cherished letters from his grandmother, and, though she is no longer here to meet with his students, he shares with them her letters, all written in Hawaiian.

“The essence of the way she communicates is in her letters,” NeSmith said. “She is very expressive, but nothing like in English. To make a literal translation sounds bizarre. It’s your mentality you have to change, not the words.”

NeSmith encourages visits with *mānaleo*, and



Keao NeSmith uses letters written in Hawaiian by his grandmother to help educate his students about the value of *mānaleo*.

has taken his students to Kaua‘i where they have met with native speakers from Ni‘ihau. He estimated that less than 1,000 native speakers of Hawaiian survive, and expressed sadness for the loss of such important cultural treasures.

He said the Hawaiian language may never be the same again once the *mānaleo* are lost, and said he believes Hawaiians need to prepare themselves to accept such a fate.

Losch said she understands the concerns that second language students may never learn the Hawaiian once spoken by *kūpuna*. Nevertheless, she finds hope and a reason to celebrate Hawaiian language as it exists today.

“You have to be hopeful, or else why are you doing this?” she asked. “There are more people speaking Hawaiian now than 30 years ago. Students today are better prepared and have a stronger desire to learn.”

With a master’s degree in Pacific Island Studies, Losch began teaching Hawaiian language at Leeward Community College in 1970 before moving to Mānoa in 1994. She now teaches fourth-year conversational courses and finds a challenge in her students who range in age from 18 to 80.

“We talk story a lot, and I think we learn by talking story. We really need to inspire people to want to carry on our language and culture. If we let it die, it will die.

“Language has to change to grow. Language has to change or it dies. Change happens – we’re not speaking Middle English today. There may be new words, but if the structure is the same, then it is still Hawaiian.”



Hawaiian Language instructor Kapā'anaokalāoikeola Oliveira often holds classes for her students at the *lo'i* at the University of Hawai‘i’s Center for Hawaiian Studies to help immerse them in the language and culture.

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