

A Kumu Mo'olelo

by KS Hawai'i Social Studies Kumu Ipolani Wright

I am a baby boomer born in Pālolo, O'ahu, raised by pure Hawaiian kūpuna who later moved us to a home in desolate Mākaha (*then known as The Sticks*) with a pristine white sand back yard called Turtle Beach.

I became a blessed recipient of Ke Ali'i Pauahi's legacy at age five. Each school day, I woke up at 3:30 a.m., left home at 4:15, and traveled on a long dark road for hours with my dad to the Kalihi bus terminal before he went to work. At 7 a.m. I caught the first bus up to the beautiful modern KS Elementary School campus.

It was there that I met my young beautiful Hawaiian music teacher Mrs. Mahela Rosehill who played the piano, 'ukulele and sang so beautifully for and with us every day. We sat on lau hala mats and sang traditional Hawaiian songs like the island medleys, about places in Hawai'i, flowers, stars, shells and more. I just loved it all and felt so happy and safe to be at school. She hugged us, smiled all the time and the sweet fresh blossoms she wore were oh so heavenly. It was home away from home.

We sang every day for music class, chapel was every Wednesday, and two times a week Miss Helene Curtis would come to our classroom and tell us enchanting Hawaiian stories. I was fascinated with her white hair that was like shiny white waves clinging tightly and perfectly to her head. I loved Mrs. Rosehill and Miss Curtis because both teachers followed us through elementary and the preparatory campus, now referred to as middle school. Life at school was magically wonderful because I knew they loved me and genuinely cared. I learned confidence, how to harmonize and how to tell wonderful stories because I loved to hear them. It was a living book.

In sixth grade we had our first "man" teacher. When he walked in I noticed his thick shiny black hair that swept stiffly together. It was like a super-thick version of Elvis' hair. Our new kumu wore a starched, white long-sleeved shirt, a tie and introduced himself as Mr. Daniel Akaka. Yes that's right! Former U.S. Senator Daniel Akaka back then, was our sixth grade teacher!

He was great! As a teacher he was sincere, kind, firm about his class rules, and chuckled to himself when the rascal boys got into trouble. He stared them down and would calmly say, "So what do you have to say for yourselves gentlemen?" Then there would be a democratic conversation. I didn't know the meaning of the word "democratic" back then. But our conversations involved fairness, justice, responsibility and the importance of citizenship and good character to maintain peace and harmony in the environment inside or out of the classroom. And the best thing is that he played tether ball with us at morning recess and we all wanted to see him lose, but I don't recall that ever happening.

Then during an ordinary sunny day on March 1959, it was announced over the PA system the declaration of Hawai'i's statehood. All the teachers went nuts. They were hugging, crying, holding hands, jumping up and down as we watched their adult chaos in silence. I was 11. Statehood?

I remember marching proudly to Kekūhaupi'o Gym. It was hot walking uphill, lunch was postponed or forgotten. All the adults seemed so happy and joyous with tears over statehood. I remember that day well.

Mr. Akaka and Mrs. Rosehill were my only Hawaiian teachers until high school, when I met our strongest, dearest and most honorable female role model, Mrs. Gladys Brandt, the Girls' School principal.

These important people could say my name right and made me feel important and confident. It was okay when I didn't know better and fabulous when I "got it right." I wasn't afraid to fail because I knew I was learning. I just learned differently and it was okay.

Teachers were role models all my life. It was a challenge to pick one to share about. Each taught me many things, but like Mrs. Rosehill, Miss Curtis and Mr. Akaka I believe it was all about how they made me feel. Kindness, trust and enduring love is what I remember and cherish.

They gave me more than I realized. It was like my mom rubbing the cool, sticky aloe sap on my sunburned body as a kid and the comfort of it melting into my skin and feeling everything would be fine. It was the trust, belief, hope and love that I felt from them that gave me confidence to try new things, be receptive, listen and experience life. They let me be me and guided my sail in the wind so I could fly.

I love music, singing, learned to play the 'ukulele and remember all those songs still and sing them with my family and even classmates when we get together at class reunions. My class of '66 is celebrating its 50-year reunion in June.

I love history because of Mr. Akaka and I've been a history teacher most of my 38-year career. I try to kanikapila when with students when possible. All my teachers gave me gifts of countless wisdom. I believe in student voice, giving them choices on assignments, a variety of ways to interact, listening to what they have to say, utilizing their ideas and telling stories as an avenue to learn, like the storytellers in my life.

For 13 years I have ventured with students around the world every summer. For three weeks. In 2000 I traveled to Washington, DC with Hawai'i's winning History Day students. Mr. Akaka remembered me after many years and invited all of us to Congress and more.

I behold my teachers' pictures and books in my classroom. They have been my heroes for what they gave me, when I had no clue about anything and when I thought school was boring. They are part of my story, and I want my students to make real-life connections so they can tell stories of their own.

Mahalo e Pauahi for the opportunities to perpetuate your legacy in our diverse community and around the globe!