



## THE INSTITUTE FOR NATIVE PACIFIC EDUCATION AND CULTURE (INPEACE): AN UNAPOLOGETICALLY HAWAIIAN ORGANIZATION

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## The Institute for Native Pacific Education and Culture (INPEACE): An Unapologetically Hawaiian Organization

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The Institute for Native Pacific Education and Culture (INPEACE) has provided educational programs to Native Hawaiian communities since 1994, nurturing the growth and development of keiki through 'ohana-focused models and empowering community members to become educators and active leaders in their own communities because they understand, live, and are invested in the community's future. INPEACE Chief Executive Officer Maile Keliipio-Acoba and Chief Program Officer Sanoe Marfil, offer a personal glimpse into their work and reflect on how their organization is supporting the Native Hawaiian community through culture-based education and professional development.

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### What brought you to INPEACE?

**Sanoe:** When my daughter was born, I was working at the [Hawai'i] Department of Education [DOE], and we were looking for a place for her early childhood education. My mother-in-law found an early childhood education program called Keiki Steps, and she wants me to start taking my daughter. I did some research, and there is a site near my home at Nānākuli Elementary School. I inquired, and we registered. That's how my journey with INPEACE started: as a parent. At Keiki Steps, I really enjoyed the opportunity to play with my child and to have her engage with her friends, and at the same time, I was engaging with the other parents. Eventually, my sister signed up as well, and she started taking both of our children, and I stepped out so that I could actually focus on my work as a DOE employee. Within the year, I got a call from the Keiki Steps Site Coordinator, Michelle Mahuka, to ask if I was interested in applying for

a position. INPEACE received a P-3 grant to assess early literacy for children ages zero to three. What we did was collect data at different schools along the [Wai'anae] Coast<sup>1</sup> and do PPVT (Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test) testing. When the opportunity was proposed, I immediately thought about it, but when I brought it home to my husband, he was like, "Yeah, no. You have a state job; it's permanent. It's gonna be hard if you go to a nonprofit because it's year-to-year and grant-based." But after some true conversations and thinking about my family, I could be at home with my daughter; I just took the leap of faith, and it's been 17 years. I think what keeps me here is that I work in the community. I'm from this community [Wai'anae Coast], and I serve my community. I've seen the impacts that INPEACE has made for me as an individual and for my family as community members, and it's just amazing to be able to live and breathe the work and to see it every day. And so that's how I came to INPEACE. That's why I continue to be at INPEACE.

**Figure 1.** *Sanoe Marfil planting with a keiki for an outdoor classroom project.*



**Maile:** For me, it's been a long journey, a combination of a lot of experiences that I've had in my life. I grew up in Mā'ili on the Waianae Coast, and at an early age was very active in activities on the [Wai'anae] Coast. When I was in seventh grade, I went to Kamehameha Schools<sup>2</sup>. I would get up and catch a bus at six o'clock in the morning, go to Kamehameha, then come home, get off the bus at 4:30 pm and do my homework, and in the process of that, I lost connections with all of my Wai'anae friends. And so

<sup>1</sup> Often referred to as the Leeward Side, the Wai'anae Coast lies along the west side of O'ahu (see Spencer's article in this issue for a robust description of this area). The population of the Wai'anae Coast is predominantly Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (~42%) with 21% of folk living in poverty (Data USA, n.d.). While the perception of the Wai'anae Coast can be negative, it is undoubtedly rich in history, culture, and community innovation (like INPEACE).

<sup>2</sup> Editor's note: Kamehameha Schools was established by ali'i (chief) Bernice Pauahi Bishop upon her death in 1884 to educate Hawai'i's children with preference given to those of Native Hawaiian ancestry (Kamehameha Schools, n.d.). Since 1887, Kamehameha Schools has pursued this educational mission through its multiple campuses, extension education programs, and scholarship programs. This immense work continues to be funded by Ke Ali'i Pauahi's trust, which is among the wealthiest private, charitable education trusts in the United States.

here I was, a member of a community that I loved, and I had zero connections at the end of the day. I lost connections with my friends and my cousins who lived on the Coast, and I felt very lonely and isolated. Also, because I lived in Wai'anae and had to catch the bus going and coming back, it was also difficult to socialize with the kids at Kamehameha because I had to get on the bus to go home. So, when I became a parent, and we still lived on the coast, I had to consider how to provide the best education for my children. Wai'anae has continually been challenged with quality education, so we tested my son for Punahou<sup>3</sup> and Kamehameha, and he got into Punahou. However, I faced the same choice: How do I send my kindergartener to a school that's even farther than Kamehameha? He won't get back in time to play any community sports. Does that really make sense for our family? So, my husband and I opted not to send him to Punahou. And at the time, the Dean [of Punahou] asked us to come in and said that my son had scored among the highest scores that they've ever had. So, as parents, we had to decide how to decline a private school and send a kid who scored so high to a struggling school district. We actually ended up moving to the [U.S.] continent to help get my children the kind of education I wanted them to have and still be able to engage in the kinds of after-school and community-based activities that I felt were important for them to engage in. In doing that, they received a fabulous education; they were exposed to a lot of opportunities that Hawai'i kids don't get exposed to. But they struggle now, even as adults, with their cultural identity. And I realized that I had to give up something that was really important in order to gain something that I also thought was important. And why is it that families from communities like ours have to make that choice? Why do we have to choose education or culture? Why can't it be both? Why do we have to choose education or community? Why can't it be both? Eventually, there came an opportunity for us to move back home to Hawai'i, and I took it. When I came home, it became really important for me to work in my community. I had the opportunity to do that with Kamehameha Schools, supporting the design of the Learning Center in Mā'ili, but I felt like I needed to do something that was much more connected to services, to have an actual impact with the people that were in the community. So, when an opportunity came up at INPEACE, I took it.

**Tell JCSCORE readers about INPEACE and some of the programs, as well as the impact you hope to make.**

**Maile:** We envision education through the lens of community empowerment. One of the big things that we look to when we envision education is we understand the importance of multigenerational education: it is a significant component of our programming. It started with Keiki Steps, our family-child interactive learning program. We have seen how, by focusing on the parents, building their skills and their abilities to support their kids academically and throughout their academic journey, the parents can then support

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<sup>3</sup> Editor's note: Founded by missionaries of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions to educate their children, Punahou School (then known as Oahu College) opened its doors in 1842 on the grounds of Kapunahou, Kona (Honolulu), O'ahu (Punahou School, n.d.). These lands were gifted by nā ali'i, Liliha and Boki. Punahou School is one of the most elite K-12 schools in the United States, with many prominent leaders of business, technology, and politics (including former U.S. president Barack Obama) as its alumni.



their students' holistic success. So, thinking about the Keiki Steps program, we have maintained a connection with 80% of the students who went through the program and have found that for those students, we can track 100% on-time high school graduation rate. We believe that's because we focus on the parents first. Through that lesson, we have instilled throughout all of our programs the importance of multigenerational approaches, focusing on the parents and the education of the kids. That's where we find the biggest impact across our programming.

**Sanoe:** When I think about INPEACE and our programs, I'm proud of how we (as an organization) learn alongside our participants. We are not necessarily the only experts holding all the knowledge, but we are willing and able to learn alongside letting them know that we don't know everything. What it does is open doors for families who don't necessarily feel comfortable regarding education. I remember when I was young, I hated reading aloud because I didn't want to get the word wrong. And I used to be like, "What the heck, why do we gotta read and take turns?" And I feel like that's an image I always have in the back of my head, when I'm running programs, and when I'm talking to families: I want to allow them the opportunity to share their expertise, and I do not want to come in and make them feel uncomfortable – to the point where they can tell me, "I don't know this." I think that approach is very beneficial. Because what I've seen is, the community members who came in with the attitude of, "I don't know how to do school, it wasn't my friend," many are now graduating with degrees and coming back, teaching in their community. And when I see them now, we laugh about how, just a couple of years ago, they were giving me a hard time. Still, now they are so confident, so secure in themselves, because we're able to open the doors and take our time with the process of empowerment through education.

**Maile:** In working with families, our approach is to hold their hand as long as they need us to hold their hand. And, I have heard criticism about "enabling" – if we have that approach, people become dependent on your organization. We are unapologetic about that approach: we will hold people's hands until they're confident, until they have built the skills that they need to be able to step out on their own. I have found that, as long as we hold their hands, they trust us to do so; they trust us not to criticize them for making mistakes, and they're more willing to try new things. In doing so, we have established and prioritized relationships, which, for us, is paramount. If you can't build relationships with the families that you serve, you can't really make an impact. Our staff have been good at building those deep relationships. I think the other thing is that we have had a strong commitment to being ourselves and integrating culture into our programming. We deliver all of our programs and services from a cultural perspective and framework. How is it that we, as Native Hawaiians, think, function, see, and know the world? It's easier for individuals to connect and understand how to learn and grow if they can see themselves in these spaces. So, the vast majority of our work is grounded in culture, so our communities can connect to their past, reflect on the present, and then build into the future.

## How do you promote Hawaiian culture with people or communities who may not feel they belong?

**Sanoe:** I have seen that sometimes, Hawaiians may feel some hesitation in learning if they don't know the culture or language or if they didn't learn it growing up. We have worked hard to offer spaces to gently bring our employees into cultural activities at whatever pace feels good for them. We implemented a monthly professional development plan focused on Hawaiian culture-based education, and we talk about a range of cultural topics from cooking to leadership values. We think that if we want our employees to go out and educate the community, these Hawaiian cultural components, values, and 'ike (to see, know, knowledge, to show) are really important for them to know. I've seen employees who have gotten so excited about the knowledge they learned through these and other PD [professional development] programs, and some have even gone on to major in Hawaiian language or Hawaiian culture, trying to learn as much as possible. You know, we've had employees who are uncomfortable, we've had employees who, for their own religious beliefs, didn't participate in our Hawaiian cultural activities at first. Over time, I've seen how their attitudes have changed, how they look at those cultural activities with a different lens: that when we do our cultural protocols, it has nothing to do with religion, it has everything to do with the love of our environment, and that personalize our relationships with our land and environment. When that shift in mindset happens, it's amazing to witness.

With our programs, I think we're trying to move our activities outside of the typical classroom and out into the world, into our environments, our 'āina (land, that which feeds). We recently opened up a new project within our Keiki Steps program called Ka'āhele, where the classroom is out in the community in 'āina. And currently we are at Mā'ili Beach on O'ahu [on the Wai'ānae Coast], or Lae Hala on Hawai'i Island. The class consists of two tents, a water cooler, and a first-aid kit, and everything else is exploratory. We see the parents and children interacting, asking questions, exploring, and picking up things. That type of exploratory education happening right now is important to our organization and our communities in building a greater sense of belonging to the lāhui (Hawaiian people, nation).

**Maile:** A big part of that is taking that gentle approach. One of the things that I talked about with staff and with people outside of our organization is that we, our generation, are trying to correct the wrongs and undo some of the trauma that we've felt generationally, generations ago, when we were a colonized people and told that we weren't good enough, because we were Hawaiian, and we weren't Western. As we start to learn and regain our identities, let us not do that to ourselves; let us not begin to tell our people that we're not Hawaiian enough because we don't do this, this, and this, right. But let's accept people for who they are and where they're at. Let's give them gentle exposure and the opportunity to learn new things, and they will come along to the spaces that they need to be in. But let's not judge them for how Hawaiian they are, just because there may be some standards of what "Hawaiinness" looks like. I think there's always that danger, as people get excited about learning the language and culture, sometimes you think that everybody should be in that same space, everybody should

be excited, and if they're not, they're not practicing this and that, then they're not fully Hawaiian. It's really important to me that we *not* do that to one another: that we offer love, space, and aloha to make sure that everybody has a space at the table, everybody is comfortable where they are, and people will move to the spaces they need to be. To me, we need that diversity to flourish and survive as a people.

**As an organization, how are you preparing the next generation of community leaders?**

**Maile:** INPEACE has done a fabulous job at mentoring: taking people under our wings and helping them to grow and fly. We've seen the impacts and effects on our community. At some point, we need to make space for those people, as they are the leaders of tomorrow. Recently, we went through an organizational strategic planning process. I asked the board if we could do it differently. I didn't want the board to do the strategic planning; I wanted the staff to do the strategic planning. So, we took the entire staff and had them provide feedback, share input, develop and design the practical vision for our organization, and figure out the strategic directions. At every step, we would then feed it back to the board and say, "How does this look?" and they approved. We continued that process: the staff established goals and objectives, established tactical plans for each of the objectives, and the board approved each piece as it was completed. In the end, the board approved the final strategic plan without having to lift a finger or even provide input. Many strategic plan elements were similar to, and aligned with, plans from previous years. But the fabulous thing about that whole process was that it demonstrated the capacity and the capabilities of our staff. It was a testament to their ability to think deeply, look at our community, and identify what needs to happen. And it was very obvious to me as a community member that as long as we continue to walk the path we're walking and mentor the people we're mentoring, my community will be okay. And that we're going to be able to count on those coming up to lead in the future. I believe that it's really important for leaders to know when to make way for new leadership. Our organization is preparing to do that right now. I think we've looked hard at how we mentor our people and assess when there is an opportunity for people to step forward they can. As I look at the depth of our organization, even though we have a lot of new people, I feel like any of us in the leadership positions could disappear, and the organization and the community would be fine. They will continue to accomplish fabulous things because we have taken the time to mentor people and grow those leadership skills. So, I think that the organization's future lies in the hands of the individuals coming up in the organization. INPEACE is strongly committed to hiring and growing the community from within.

**Sanoe:** I have a funny story – I heard through the community grapevine about another organization that keeps trying to recruit some of our staff, and it's known in the community that no one ever wants to leave INPEACE. That story has resonated with me so much because I'm always thinking about putting our employees first and making sure that I meet them where they're at and so, when I think about preparing the next generation of leaders, for me, it's about being able to treat our employees with respect and aloha, the same way we do with our participants.

## What is one thing you want INPEACE to be known for?

**Maile:** I want to be clear that INPEACE is unapologetic about being Hawaiian. It's been suggested before that maybe we shouldn't specifically say "Native Hawaiians" in our mission statement because we should serve everybody. We do serve everybody. We recognize that it's important to serve everybody in the community for Hawaiians to succeed. They have to succeed alongside their peers, but we're here to serve Native Hawaiians and to make sure that they have the best chances.

**Figure 2.** INPEACE's Maile Keliipio-Acoba (CEO, left) and Sanoë Marfil (CPO, right) with Kana'ipono awardee John Wataoka, principal of Wai'anae Intermediate (center) at the 2023 Third Annual Jubilee fundraising event held at Ward Village.



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