



ISLAND MATTERS *Mufi Hannemann*

Kalihi Kai: A True Inspiration For The Arts

Decades ago, I began my educational journey as a student at Kalihi Kai Elementary School. My kindergarten schoolteacher was a strict yet caring educator named Barbara Leong. Years later when I ran into her, she remarked, “You were the biggest Easter bunny in class thanks to your mom, who dressed you, and your dad was such a gentleman.”

Mrs. Leong and I continued to meet quite regularly after our chance rendezvous because she left such an indelible impression on me of the positive impact that teachers can have on their students. So you can imagine the chicken-skin feeling that enveloped me as I strolled onto the campus 60 years later for a special presentation.

Last week, I presented a \$16,000 Charity Walk check to Hawai‘i Arts Alliance, which immediately offered part of that sum to Kalihi Kai to support the Dillingham-area school’s continued participation in the Turnaround Arts Program.

Hawai‘i Arts Alliance is a private, statewide nonprofit organization that acts as an advocate for and champion of the arts. I have always been impressed with the work of the organization,



The author (center) at Kalihi Kai Elementary with Hawai‘i Arts Alliance director of community wellness Sara Mizban, Kalihi Kai principal Marc Kawahara, HAA interim CEO Terry Liu and HAA Turnaround Arts Program director Lei Ahsing.

PHOTO COURTESY HLTA

and this partnership with the Turnaround Arts Program is another example of the fine work that they do in promoting the arts. Led by program director Lei Ahsing, this initiative is currently in its fourth year of implementation at both Kalihi Kai Elementary, as well as Kamaile Academy in Wai‘anae, with both schools seeing a great deal of upward progress in their student bodies.

The Turnaround Arts Program is a highly successful national arts education initiative that was founded in 2011 by the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities under the leadership of then-First Lady Michelle Obama, and is now administered by the Kennedy Center.

The premise is simple: take a struggling school in a high-risk and high-poverty neighborhood, add teachers

and administrators who are well-trained in arts integration strategies, and watch the students excel. This approach to education has proven time and again to be a godsend for students who face some of the toughest education challenges across the country.

Currently, nearly 80 schools in 17 states are home to a Turnaround Arts Program. Each of these schools is supported by a local part-

ner like Hawai‘i Arts Alliance, which acts as a conduit between the school and the national office, and which provides training, arts education resources and continuing education opportunities for teachers at Turnaround Arts schools. Additionally, the national office also provides the needed physical materials required to build a strong arts education program.

After the check presentation, Kalihi Kai Elementary School’s personable and creative principal Marc Kawahara was gracious enough to lead me and several members of the Arts Alliance on a school tour where we were able to sit in on several classes that were utilizing different aspects of the Turnaround Arts Program.

What I saw during our tour blew me away, and I was in awe. And while it has been many years since I was a student in a formal classroom, what I observed was inspiring. I saw teachers who were fully invested in their students and their curriculum. All three instructors — Michelle Iwasaki, Marisa Tshako and Ruth Komatsu — did a superb job of connecting with their pupils, and the presence of some adult strangers failed to distract

their attention and interest on their learning activities. I met children who were bright, highly spirited and who were very clearly enjoying their educational experience. In fact, some invited me to participate in their exercises.

What I also found stimulating was how arts integration affects a student’s learning in all subjects. It would be easy to assume that Kalihi Kai students would face difficulties in subjects outside of the arts and humanities, but quite the contrary. Students at Kalihi Kai have performed strongly in a variety of academic areas, including STEM classes, even winning first place in the “Innovative Solution Award” category at a national-level robotics competition. Indeed, these Kalihi youngsters are living testimony to the fact that having an appreciation and awareness of the arts can lead to improved academic progress and achievement.

Now I can’t wait to see the mural that the HLTA funding will help support at Kalihi Kai — as well as visit Kamaile Academy, another recipient of our largesse — and witness how they are teaching the arts with a strong focus on our Native Hawaiian culture.