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Alumnus gives back to Hawaiian homeland

Tue, 12/11/2007 - 9:06pm

Rosemarie Howard | [University Advancement](#) | 11 December 2007

Return-ability, a phrase coined by BYU-Hawaii administrators, encapsules their hope that students will gain an education, both secular and spiritual, and then return to their native land to not only become gainfully employed, but to also make a contribution as ambassadors for peace.

How does a native Hawaiian do that? [Robert Lononuiakea Ikuwa](#), a 2003 graduate of BYU-Hawaii and native Hawaiian is a good example of the answer to that question.

Born in Kona, Hawaii, Ikuwa (who goes by “Lono”) came to Oahu to attend the Kamehameha School as a seventh grader. After graduating in 1995, he served a mission to Japan, and came home with a desire to open his own Japanese fast food restaurant franchise.

“After some prayer and fasting my plans changed,” he said, “and I decided to attend BYU-Hawaii.” He finished his degree in International Cultural Studies with an emphasis in communications in three years, and went on to work as a translator and editor for [Na Kamalei](#), an early childhood education program that focuses on producing educational materials about the native Hawaiian culture.

While working with Na Kamalei, the idea for a children’s book about Hamana Kalili and the famous [shaka sign](#), was born. Although another story he wrote, “The Face of Her King,” has been published by Na Kamalei, the shaka sign story wasn’t selected for publication. He decided to establish his own publishing company, [Na Puke Hawaii](#), to produce “Tutu Hamana: the shaka sign story.”

“I felt a wonderful internal push to complete this book, and it proved to be successful, even though there were many areas of improvement,” said Ikuwa.

Working with a talented group of people from the Ko’olauloa district, he wrote and published the book in two months. “I don’t recommend it,” said Ikuwa. “Usually a project like this takes six months: writing, storyboarding, illustrations/photographs, design and layout, editing.”

Among those who helped with the book’s creation were: Malia Andrus and Rena Thompson, who did the photography; and Auntie Kela Miller and Ka’imi Teo-Tafiti, who were the subjects for the photographers. Laie historical photos, including some of the hukilau, from the BYU-Hawaii archives are also included in the book.

Publishing a book includes marketing the book. Ikuwa turned, once again, to family and friends for support. “We did some pre-sales of books and fundraisers,” said Ikuwa. “I think in the first couple of weeks we sold 1,000 books. It’s wonderful to have community and family support.”

As part of the marketing plan, a [booksigning](#) was held 29 November in the BYU-Hawaii Aloha Center. “I wanted people from the community to participate,” said Ikuwa, “and they did. I think around 250 people attended.”

Vintage footage of the old Laie hukilau from the BYU-Hawaii archives was shown, along with singing and hula dancing to live accompaniment. “We decorated the refreshment tables similar to how they did it during the hukilau days in Laie,” said Ikuwa. Refreshments included dried fish from Kona, donated by his mother.

Among those who participated were: Ikuwa’s halau: Na manu hoolai o lononuiakea, Halau Hula o Kekela, BYU-Hawaii’s archival department, Hawaiian Language Immersion Institution, Laie Hawaiian Choir, and Koolauloa children’s chorus. And, of course, Ikuwa was available for book signing.

“A portion of the proceeds of the book sales goes to the education of Hawaiian language immersion programs here in Koolauloa,” said Ikuwa. “As a Hawaiian language teacher, I wanted to give back to these programs that I believe can have a positive cultural and education impact upon the students and families.”

Ikuwa said he hopes the book gives pride to Hawaiians to know the shaka sign is 100 percent Hawaiian and that there are modern-day heroes in the Hawaiian culture.

Originally written in Hawaiian, the book has also been published in English and Japanese. “I really believe in believe in the mission of BYU-Hawaii and this community to spread peace internationally,” said Ikuwa, “and I think this book has the potential to do so.”

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