

SOCIAL WORK IN ACTION

Hā Kūpuna: Telling Stories of Challenge and Resilience Through Data

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Social Work in Action is a solicited column from the social work community in Hawai'i. It is edited by HJMPH Contributing Editor Sophia Kim PhD, of the Myron B. Thompson School of Social Work at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa.

On a rainy morning in Hilo in 2008, a group of *kūpuna* (elders) gathered to discuss their wants and needs, their strengths and struggles with a team of researchers from the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. The researchers posed a simple question, "What makes someone a *kupuna*?" Over the last 13 years, *Hā Kūpuna*, the National Resource Center for Native Hawaiian Elders, has convened elders, families, and those who provide direct support to them to ask questions about their lived experiences, and to explore what they need to have a healthy and good "later life."

Hā Kūpuna, founded in 2006 under the direction of Drs. Noreen Mokuau, Colette Browne, and Kathryn Braun, has focused its work on developing a baseline of information about Native Hawaiian elders, their health and overall well-being. The field of gerontology is devoted to examining different aspects of later life, and while there is a rich body of scholarship on Hawaiian history and culture, data regarding Native Hawaiian elders are limited. Most information centered around the poor health profile of *kānaka maoli* (Native Hawaiians). High rates of certain health problems - including cancer, heart disease and diabetes - were documented, but lacking were reliable data on other health and social disparities and their possible causes. Resilience and strength of *kūpuna* were legendary, but it was not a story being represented by data. *Hā Kūpuna* researchers knew that without a more complete picture of Native Hawaiian elders, policies and practices were limited in addressing the needs of this population and their families. Through a variety of different methods, the *Hā Kūpuna* team compiled a body of information about this special group.

The name *Hā Kūpuna* refers to the practice of an elder transmitting their knowledge and very life force by exhaling one's final *hā* (breath) into a chosen person, so that one's legacy will live on beyond physical death. It describes the passing of intergenerational knowledge. This tradition is depicted in the *Hā Kūpuna* logo which shows a revered Hawaiian elder and physician, Dr. Kekuni Blaisdell, sharing his *hā* with a young girl. An advisory board member from the very beginning, the late Dr. Blaisdell was key in forming and guiding the center.

The center began with two advisory boards, one composed of leaders in the *kānaka maoli* community and the other of service providers from the professional gerontology field. The value of the interface of these two groups was quickly realized. In 2008 the two boards were combined to form the Joint Advisory Committee that now helps to set direction and focus to the Center's work. The Joint Advisory Committee meets annually to discuss the activities at their respective agencies and to provide feedback on the recent developments at the Center. Housed in the Myron B. Thompson School of Social Work and funded by the Administration on Community Living and the Department of Health and Human Services, the goal of *Hā Kūpuna* is to improve access to and delivery of services to Native Hawaiian elders and their caregivers through the development and dissemination of knowledge around health and long-term care patterns and preferences.

In 2019, *Hā Kūpuna* published their most recent study in the *Journal of Aging and Health*. The article highlighted the benefits of using a mixed methods approach of both qualitative and quantitative research to best uncover and understand aging issues faced by Native Hawaiian elders. This study captures the nature of the center's work. It allows researchers to honor the rich stories and wisdom of *kūpuna* as well as uses their skills as trained researchers to interpret data to ensure that the needs of *kūpuna* are being met. The quantitative data confirmed numerous health disparities experienced by Native Hawaiians, whereas the qualitative data revealed Native Hawaiians' own limited knowledge of the poor health profile and documented their historical and contemporary experiences with discrimination in education, employment, and health care. Hawaiian culture was identified as a continued source of resilience in support of elders and family caregiving. The authors of the article suggested policies, practices, and research directions to respond to and improve *kūpuna* health.

The center has remained responsive and flexible to community needs as they arise. In 2017, Dr. Lana Ka'opua, a center researcher, led a research training program with middle school students at a Hawaiian Charter School to explore the nature of

intergenerational living situations that are more common for Native Hawaiian families than families of other ethnicities. A discovery was made that Hawaiian youth were not just living with their elders, but they were also helping to care for them, especially those with some form of dementia. The cultural value of *mālama kūpuna* (care and respect for elders) was apparent, but it was less clear that youth could discern between “normal aging” and “dementia-related aging,” and more importantly, had knowledge of the best way to provide assistance. An idea was born to create a teaching tool to help youth in Hawai‘i better understand the symptoms of dementia and learn how to help support their family and *kūpuna* with this challenge. A product of this effort was a storybook, which was released in July 2019. The booklet is about a young girl named Pomai, and her Papa (grandfather), who is starting to display the early signs of Alzheimer’s disease (See Figure 1). Within 24 hours of the press release, requests for hard copies flooded in, suggesting the need for this type of resource in the community.

In response to the question, “How do you define a *kupuna*?” the themes that have emerged over the years viewed elderhood positively in contrast to a western view of aging as negative. Participants often speak of the wisdom that comes with experience and the role of elders as transmitters and teachers of cultural knowledge and values. Another common theme is the relational nature of being a *kupuna* – described both as having biological grandchildren as well as being respected in the broader community. It is in this spirit that *Hā Kūpuna* continues to pursue its research objectives, to create and disseminate data to direct service providers who work to improve the health profile of Hawaiian elders.

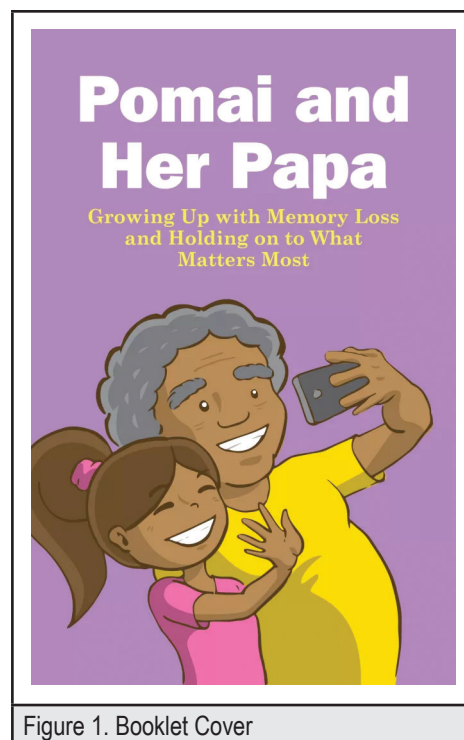


Figure 1. Booklet Cover

For more information about the work of *Hā Kūpuna*, check out their website at manoa.hawaii.edu/hakupuna.

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