

# SOCIAL WORK IN ACTION

## **Aloha E Dean Mokuau: *Mai Ka Ho'oku'i A Ka Hālāwai.* From Zenith to Horizon**

Theresa M. Kreif MSW, LSW; Kathryn L. Braun DrPH; and the leadership  
of the Myron B. Thompson School of Social Work

*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 Mānoa.

Dean Noreen Mokuau retires this year after a decade of service as Dean of the Myron B. Thompson School of Social Work (MBTSSW) and after nearly 40 years of service to the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (UHM). As a Native Hawaiian woman, she is committed to education that is anchored in excellence and founded in the unique attributes of Hawai'i and the Pacific-Asia region. With a deep aloha for Hawai'i, her work is rooted in 'ohana and community. As with all things in Hawaiian culture, there is appreciation and acknowledgement of people, land, and spiritual realm. She acknowledges that her life work is based on the direction and guidance of her own 'ohana with special credit to the legacy of her parents.

From her cultural lens, she has taught the importance of the links of our past, present, and future, in which we trace our historical legacy, highlight the foundation of our contemporary work, and envision growth for the future. She has been known to begin speeches by sharing her genealogy and the influence of family and place on her work. In these "talks," she has often said that all members of her family—past, present, and future—stand with her in the sharing of stories and information. In addition, she has reinforced the value of genealogy in the MBTSSW by linking the life of the School's namesake, Myron "Pinky" B. Thompson, with present and future direction of MBTSSW. For many of us highlighting these links accentuates the meaning and purpose of our work when framed in the context of both our personal and professional lineage.

With a foundation in genealogy, her lifetime commitment to social justice and health equity has borne out many "firsts." Dean Mokuau is the first Native Hawaiian woman to be awarded a doctorate in social work which she earned from the University of California Los Angeles, the first Native Hawaiian dean of a school of social work, and the first faculty to hold the Barbara Cox Anthony Endowed Co-Chair in Aging at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. Her roles as a leader, scholar, instructor, and agent of change weave together her commitment to social justice and health equity through her leadership hallmarks, including *kākou* (support) engagement and the building of

a *kauhale*.<sup>1</sup> Under her leadership, MBTSSW prioritized the perspective that interdisciplinary partnership and community engagement for educational excellence will help us lift the most vulnerable among us.

In the same manner that her life work is founded in genealogy, it is also grounded in *pilina*, the relationships and connections with people and place. She considers the UHM as a second home and a place where she has developed roots and special connections with people who have strengthened her roles as teacher, program chair of the BSW, MSW and PhD programs, and dean. Since becoming dean in 2010, she supported the reaccreditation of the Department of Social Work for the maximum term, the reapproval of the social work PhD program, and the formal establishment of the BA Degree in Public Health. She also stewarded the launch of the first fully online degree program (BSW) at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa in Fall 2018. Her *kāko'o* efforts were instrumental in improving the US News & World Report ranking of MBTSSW from the top 33% (2012) to the top 20% (2019) nationally. Her focus on interdisciplinary collaboration was instrumental in her reorganization of the school from a single academic unit (social work) to three academic units (social work, public health, and center on aging).<sup>1,2</sup> She was also essential in finalizing and securing three endowments for the schools, including the Barbara Cox Anthony Endowed Chair (\$2 million), the Dr. Richard and T. Rose Takasaki Endowed Professorship for Social Policy (\$1 million), and the Lili'uokalani Trust Endowed Professorship (\$500,000).

While her scholarly work has applicability for all disenfranchised populations, it prioritizes Asian and Pacific Islanders, with special attention to Native Hawaiians. She has edited three books, authored more than 100 publications, and provided more than 50 national and international presentations. She has been Multiple Principal Investigator (with Dean Jerris Hedges) for more than \$40 million in interdisciplinary extramural grants including Ola HAWAII (Health And Wellness Achieved by Impacting Inequalities) and RMATRIX II (RCMI Multidisci-

plinary and Translational Research Infrastructure Expansion), both funded by the National Institute for Minority Health and Health Disparities.<sup>3</sup> She has also been the Co- Investigator of Hā Kūpuna: National Resource Center for Native Hawaiian Elders, funded by the US Administration on Aging.<sup>4</sup> She has held elected positions on the Social Work Board of Directors of the Bachelors Program Directors (BPD) and the National Association of Deans and Directors (NADD) of Schools of Social Work. She was appointed to positions on the National Committee on Minority Affairs of the National Association for Social Workers (NASW) and the Commission for Diversity and Social and Economic Justice of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE); and held scholarly positions as editorial/consulting board member for *Social Work* and the *Journal of Social Work Education*.

The substance of her work champions equity, cultural diversity, and social and economic justice. Her seminal contributions are organized around Native Hawaiians. In her recent works, she links health disparities with historical trauma and social determinants, such as socioeconomic status, the physical environment, discrimination, and legislative policies. For example, while multiethnic Hawai‘i is one of the healthiest states in the United States, health disparities continue to plague the approximately 24% of the state’s population who are Native Hawaiians. In Hawai‘i, Native Hawaiians have the shortest life expectancy of the largest ethnic groups, high rates of mortality from cancer and heart disease, and experience disproportionate rates of poverty, incarceration, and addictions.<sup>5-8</sup> Based on her life’s work and that of many other scholars and providers, there is increasing recognition of the merit of culturally anchored programs to reduce the effects of social issues. These programs are strengths-based in the honoring of cultural values and practices and are community engaged and interdisciplinary in scope. For many Native Hawaiians, this translates into the fundamental emphasis on the relationships of individual, family, community, environment, and spiritual realm, and their participation in the development and delivery of social services.<sup>9-18</sup> Dean Mokuau recognizes that there is a continued need for vigilance to ensure survival and thriving for Native Hawaiians and other disenfranchised groups.

Shortly following her appointment as the MBTSSW Dean in 2010, she provided *kāko‘o* to Anake Lynette Paglinawan to secure funding from the Office of Hawaiian Affairs for the continuation of the Hawaiian Learning Program in social work (2011-2017). Beginning in 2017, Dean Mokuau secured funding from the Hawai‘i Medical Services Association Foundation and Hawai‘i Pacific Foundation, Inc, to develop and began teaching an innovative course called *Ke A‘o Mau* (Learning Preserved), presenting the wisdom of Native Hawaiian *kumu loea* (expert teachers). The class emphasized Hawaiian-anchored practices that may yield solutions to the array of social and health disparities confronting Hawaiians and other populations today. The signature interdisciplinary course is organized around principles

and practices that support cultural competency in work with Native Hawaiians. It is designed to maximize learning from *kumu loea* in areas that impact health and social justice such as *‘ōlelo* (language), *mea ‘ai* (food and nutrition), *mele* (song), *ho‘oponopono* (family conflict resolution), *aloha ‘āina* (caring for the land), and *lomilomi* (massage). *Kumu loea* represent diverse fields, including social work, public health, law, Hawaiian history, and medicine. Associated with Ke A‘o Mau and *kumu loea*, Dean Mokuau, along with *hoaloha* (friends) Dr. Kathryn Braun and Mr. Kukunaakalā Yoshimoto, are presently working on a book, *Hoho‘i i ka Māno Wai: Returning to the Source of Life*. This book documents the *mo‘olelo* (stories) of *kumu loea* who are renowned experts in culturally anchored practices, including *lomilomi*, *lua*, *ho‘oponopono*, *mele*, *mana*, *‘āina momona*, and navigation. Most of these practices were suppressed following the colonization of the Hawaiian archipelago and the illegal overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawai‘i. The reemergence and refinement of these practices requires knowledge exchange from one generation to the next. Thus, each chapter explores how *kumu loea* learned their practice and how they are teaching and influencing the next generation.<sup>19</sup>

Community service is a benchmark of social work, and Dean Mokuau has served in a number of roles for government and community organizations. For example, she has been a board or advisory committee member of the John Howard Association, Papa Ola Lōkahi, the Queen Lili‘uokalani Children’s Center, and Blueprint for Change.

Perhaps her most devoted service contribution locally has been to Queen Emma and King Kamehameha IV through her work at The Queen’s Medical Center, the largest private hospital in Hawai‘i. Her affiliation with Queen’s began in 2003, when she was appointed as Vice-Chair of Board of Trustees of Queen Emma Land, and in 2004 when she was asked to chair the Native Hawaiian Health Committee of The Queen’s Health System and became the vice-chair of the Quality and Patient Safety Committee of the Queen’s Medical Center; she held these roles until 2012. In 2005, she joined the Board of Trustees for The Queen’s Medical Center and served as its chair from 2007-2012. She also served on the board of the Queen Emma Foundation. During her decade in service to Queen’s, Dean Mokuau advocated for improvements to care that helped to fulfill the intent of the medical center’s founders, Queen Emma and King Kamehameha IV, which was “to provide in perpetuity quality health care services to improve the well-being of Native Hawaiians and all of the people of Hawai‘i.”

Dean Mokuau’s work has not gone unnoticed. As a distinguished teacher and mentor, she was awarded the UH Presidential Citation for Meritorious Teaching in 1994, the National Association of Social Workers, Hawai‘i Chapter’s Social Work Educator of the Year Award in 1996, the UH Regents Excellence in Teaching Award in 1997. For her service commitments, she was awarded the UH Wo and Lau Ching Community Award in 2001, the

Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors' President's Medal of Honor in 2008, the National Association of Social Workers, Hawai'i Chapter's Lifetime Achievement Award in 2014. Distinctions for her scholarly performance with its focus on Native Hawaiians and aging include the Native Hawaiian Chamber of Commerce O'ō Award for outstanding achievements in the Native Hawaiian community in 2014; the Educator of the Year, Native Hawaiian Educators Association in 2015, and the American Society on Aging Award for Excellence in Multicultural Aging in 2015.

Her leadership has ensured synergy among social work, public health, and gerontology and greater connectivity with allied professions. As Dean Mokuau notes, "Let us work collectively for a just and healthy world, in this time as we continue to witness escalating violence, debilitating diseases, health epidemics, traumatic natural disasters, and dangerous international conflict. As we confront today's challenges, our call to action is in educational excellence that builds a cadre of professionals who are leaders with a deep understanding of humanity and who hold the knowledge and skills that will lead to transformational change in social justice and health equity." In her address to graduates in Spring 2020, she underscored their *kuleana* as the next generation of social workers and public health workers. She also called upon the *mana* (spiritual powers) that reaches from the zenith to the horizon to guide and fortify them for the work ahead. We now call upon this *mana* to guide and fortify Dean Mokuau as she moves purposively towards a new life. *Mai ka ho'oku'i a ka hālāwai.*

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