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A Place to Belong: How Ibasho Is Redefining Aging in Hawai'i

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The Spotlight on Nursing is a recurring column from the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa School of Nursing and Dental Hygiene (SONDH). It is edited by Holly B. Fontenot, PhD, APRN, WHNP-BC, FAAN, FNAP; Associate Dean for Research, Professor, and Frances A. Matsuda Chair in Women's Health for SONDH, and HJH&SW Contributing Editor; and Joanne R. Loos PhD, Science Writer for SONDH

Acronyms

UH Mānoa: University of Hawai'i at Mānoa
OLM: Our Lady of the Mount Church

Introduction

Society worldwide is experiencing a demographic shift that demands urgent attention, and Hawai'i is no exception. The state's population is aging at a rapid pace. In 2024, 21.5% of residents were aged 65 and over, a figure expected to rise to 1 in 4 people by 2035.[1] This rate outpaces the national average. This super-aged society, where more than 20% of the population is 65 or older, presents significant challenges, including increased demand for health care services, a shrinking health care workforce, rising costs for caregivers and social services, and inadequate housing for older persons.[2,3]

Until recently, the concept of aging in place was considered the preferred and most desirable option for many older persons, emphasizing staying in one's own home. Yet this approach has been critiqued for its static and individualistic focus.[4] It often overlooks the social dimensions of aging, such as isolation and loneliness. In response, innovative community-based models like *Ibasho*[5,6] have emerged to redefine what it means to age well within a community.

The concept and history of Ibasho

Ibasho is a Japanese concept meaning "a place where one belongs."[7] It goes beyond physical space to encompass community, purpose, and intergenerational connection. The principles-based model empowers older persons to co-create elder-led community hubs that provide opportunities to contribute through mutual care and active participation.[7,8] At its core, the *Ibasho* model rests on several principles: elders as assets rather than passive recipients of care, intergenerational connection, cultural adaptability, and the strengthening of social capital and community resilience.[7,8]

The philosophy behind *Ibasho* is rooted in a moment of insight Dr. Emi Kiyota, an environmental gerontologist, experienced while working on a senior housing project for Buddhist monks in rural Bhutan in 2009. There, she encountered the quote, "The time to be happy is now, the place to be happy is here, and the way to be happy is to make other people happy." This quote, which was displayed in a local elementary school, profoundly shaped Dr. Kiyota's thinking. It highlighted a gap in how society approaches elder care. Current systems often treat older persons as primarily in need of care, rather than as contributors to their communities. *Ibasho* challenges that narrative, recognizing older persons as valuable assets who are capable of leading, teaching, and fostering positive change in their neighborhoods.

Dr. Kiyota's work has demonstrated the model's effectiveness across diverse settings. In Japan, following the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, she established the first Ibasho House in Ofunato City, Iwate with the collaboration among Honeywell Hometown Solutions, Operation USA, and Tenjin Kai, a local social welfare organization. This elder-led initiative created a communal space for healing and rebuilding trust. The model has since expanded to Nepal, the Philippines, and Singapore, where elders have led agricultural projects, educational programs, and disaster recovery efforts. Impact evaluations confirmed that participation in Ibasho projects enhances elders' sense of control, expands social networks, and strengthens feelings of belonging.[5]

Ibasho is relevant for Hawai'i

Given the local value of Hawai'i that reveres *kupuna* (elders), the *Ibasho* model may also resonate locally, as it regards *kupuna* as resources rather than resource consumers. The principle of revering *kupuna* is echoed in several Asian and Pacific Islander cultures, such as Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, and Samoan. In the Filipino culture, the grandparents are the primary caregivers to their grandchildren.[9,10]

Hawai'i faces unique challenges that make the *Ibasho* model especially relevant. The state faces a shortage of health care workers, particularly in rural areas. Further, the geographically dispersed population leads to many older persons experiencing physical and social isolation. The high cost of living pushes younger generations off the islands, shrinking the pool of caregivers.[11] *Ibasho* offers a way forward by empowering elders to take leadership roles, bridging generational gaps and creating resilient, interdependent communities.

New partnership with the School of Nursing and Dental Hygiene

The University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa (UH Mānoa) School of Nursing and Dental Hygiene is developing a strategy for partnerships that would leverage the clinical nursing expertise of graduate and undergraduate students to foster community connections and promote health using the *Ibasho* framework with Dr. Kiyota's expertise. Dr. Kiyota plans to operationalize *Ibasho* in Hawai‘i and strengthen community-based research on healthy aging through a multidisciplinary approach involving the UH Mānoa School of Nursing and Dental Hygiene. Potential partners include the UH Mānoa Center on Aging, the Thompson School of Social Work and Public Health, the UH Mānoa School of Architecture, and the John A. Burns School of Medicine. A pilot group, Ibasho Friends, has already assembled at Our Lady of the Mount Catholic Church (OLM) in Kalihi Valley, and organizers are preparing to adapt the *Ibasho* model to Hawai‘i's unique cultural and geographic context. The group, composed predominantly of Filipino members, was formed after Dr. Kiyota introduced the *Ibasho* concept to various faith-based communities in Hawai‘i, including Christian, Methodist, Congregational, and other churches, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The OLM community showed the most interest and was selected as the pilot site. This pilot will serve as a test for intergenerational programming and elder-led initiatives, demonstrating how the *Ibasho* philosophy can be applied to diverse communities. Previous *Ibasho* sites have focused on elder-selected activities such as developing a community garden and farmers' market and teaching and engaging in cultural traditions with younger generations. For this pilot, participants will apply the model by striving to achieve several goals: (1) Identify a community space or hub with Ibasho members and the pastor of OLM to serve as Hawai‘i's Ibasho Café; (2) Begin small-scale activities and programs that foster connection and purpose; and (3) Gradually transition leadership to the members themselves as they develop their capacity to select, organize, and sustain the group's activities. Over time, members may expand to new *Ibasho* sites, supported by a clear structure for managing growth.

Central to *Ibasho*'s approach is the belief that aging is not a decline to be feared, rather, it is a stage of life rich with meaning, purpose, and contribution. Under the premise that everyone, regardless of age or ability, seeks to be useful to others, *Ibasho* creates community hubs where elders can lead, mentor, and build community. By doing so, it challenges assumptions about aging and reframes it as a period of growth, connection, and impact. Similar to the "third places" that urban planners describe—informal gathering spaces beyond home and work—*Ibasho* empowers elders to create their own hubs of belonging.[5] These elder-led spaces not only reduce isolation but also strengthen intergenerational ties, offering children mentors, reconnecting adults across generations, and making neighborhoods more resilient. The partnership described here comprises 3 major components: (1) Student involvement in the development of community resilience through co-creation with the community; (2) Education through the combination of theory and practical implementation; and (3) Research on person-environmental fit, which may inform future environment and care for seniors in the state.

Conclusion

For Hawai‘i, with its rapidly aging population, workforce shortages, and rising isolation, this model may offer both timely solutions and unique opportunities. Rooted in values of family and community, *Ibasho* provides a framework for honoring older adults as assets rather than burdens. By embracing it, Hawai‘i can pioneer innovative care models that transform aging into a stage of leadership, creativity, and social contribution. Ultimately, *Ibasho* reminds us that happiness, purpose, and community are inseparable. With this vision, Hawai‘i can become a living example of how aging, when supported by intergenerational collaboration, can be a time of empowerment, engagement, and meaningful growth.

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