

Stories that Sustain: Talk-Story and Portraiture Across Generations of Women in Medicine in Hawai'i

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The Medical School Hotline column of the University of Hawai'i John A. Burns School of Medicine (JABSOM) was founded in 1993, by Satoru Izutu PhD (former vice-dean of JABSOM). It is edited by HJH&SW Contributing Editor, Kathleen Kihmm Connolly PhD, Office of the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, JABSOM.

Burnout in medicine continues to rise, with women physicians carrying a disproportionate share of its burden.¹ Although women now make up more than half of many medical school classes, they remain underrepresented in leadership and often face a combination of workplace inequities, increasing clinical and administrative demands, and heavier caregiving responsibilities outside of work. In Hawai'i, the picture reflects both progress and persistent gaps. Women comprise two-thirds of the 2025 class at the University of Hawai'i John A. Burns School of Medicine (JABSOM). Within the Department of Medicine (DOM), women comprise just over one-third of internal medicine residents and compensated faculty, and only 15% of DOM faculty at the professor rank. Although these figures represent different cohorts and career stages, they illustrate persistent differences in representation across the medical education and academic career continuum. These differences suggest the need for approaches that move beyond documenting disparity to strengthen belonging, visibility, and durable support across career stages and generations.

The Creative Pedagogy Award project, now being implemented through the *Mana Kauka Wahine* (collective strength, generational wisdom of women physicians) initiative, was developed in response to that need. The project centers on 2 complementary strategies: first, the visual representation of distinguished past and present women faculty physicians through portraiture²; and second, the creation of dedicated space for intergenerational support, mentorship, and community-building through talk-story gatherings. The initiative began with an inaugural gathering in September 2025 and is intended to continue through future talk-story sessions and a portrait gallery in the DOM offices. This work builds on the legacy of Dr. Elizabeth "Liz" Keali'ikua'aina Tam, the first woman JABSOM Chair of Medicine, whose leadership continues to shape the DOM's sense of *pilina* (connection) and shared purpose. It is grounded in Hawaiian relational concepts of *kaikua'ana* (older sibling of the same sex) and *kaikaina* (younger sibling of the same sex), reflecting a relational order shaped by knowledge, experience, and responsibility, in which roles of

teaching and learning may shift across time and context. The project also draws on *mo'olelo* (storytelling) as a methodology, celebrating Indigenous oral tradition and the power of narrative to transmit knowledge, values, and resilience.

At that inaugural gathering, the project team brought together approximately 30 participants from within and beyond the Department of Medicine. Residents and both current and retired faculty members came together to honor Drs. Sharon Vitousek and Helen Petrovitch, pioneers whose distinct careers in the Department of Medicine have shaped medicine in Hawai'i (Figure 1). More than a formal panel, the gathering took the form of "talk-story": a locally rooted practice of reciprocal conversation and storytelling in which people share not only what they know but also how they came to know it. In this setting, talk-story strengthened relationships and created space to reflect on shared history and responsibility to one another across generations. In that spirit, this column carries forward the sustaining wisdom that emerged from the honorees' *mo'olelo* (stories and lived histories). It reflects what became visible when a community made time not only to honor accomplishment but also to listen closely to the experiences, relationships, and sources of support that helped the honorees remain and thrive in medicine over the course of their careers.

Drawing on Dr. Petrovitch's early years at Queen Emma Clinic in the 1980s, during a time when gender gaps in medicine were wider than they are today, she reflected on how caring for patients who struggled with financial strain, physical labor, and limited flexibility changed the way she understood her own profession. Medicine was hard, she acknowledged, but it was also meaningful, intellectually engaging, and comparatively privileged. "Medicine is not just a job. I see it as a privilege. I really do," she shared. At the same time, she spoke candidly about the emotional weight of clinical responsibility. She recalled the stress and worry of advising a patient to seek emergency care, only to have the patient decline, and the long evening that followed as she wrestled with uncertainty, concern, and self-doubt. Through these experiences, she learned that she could provide guidance and recommendations but ultimately could not control outcomes. What emerged from that story was not detachment, but a more sustainable understanding of responsibility, one that allows physicians to remain committed without being consumed.



Figure 1. Dr. Sharon Vitousek (left) and Dr. Helen Petrovitch (right), honorees of the inaugural *Mana Kauka Wahine* gathering, September 2025. Portrait by Yola Monakhov Stockton, Assistant Professor of Photography at the Department of Art and Art History, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, to be featured as a part of a portrait gallery of women physicians at the Department of Medicine offices.

Dr. Vitousek's *mo'olelo* centered on the intersection of professional demands with pregnancy and early parenthood. In her words, "It became a challenge for me once I started having kids." What was striking in her account was that she did not frame medical school or residency itself as the main barrier. Instead, the turning point came later, when the structure of training no longer fit the realities and demands of family life. She described becoming pregnant during her chief resident year, at a time when maternity leave was far shorter than what she felt she needed. Her response was practical and relational: she asked for help, calling her friend and colleague, Dr. Petrovitch, to step in and enable a longer leave. That story carried more than nostalgia. It surfaced a form of wisdom that is often absent from formal curricula: ask for help early, lean on trusted relationships for support, and do not view unsustainable strain as a test of character or aptitude. Dr. Vitousek's advice was clear: "Get help. Get as much help as you can afford, and if it's still not working, get more help." She also reframed balance as threefold: career, family, and self. In this reframing, rest is not an indulgence. As she put it, "It's helping you do your job better."

Beyond individual stories, the gathering itself revealed a broader truth: community is not separate from the work of

medicine, but part of the human infrastructure that makes it sustainable. This became clear not through formal declarations, but through the testimony of colleagues of Dr. Vitousek and Dr. Petrovitch, who described years of shared writing, editing, research, and mutual support. Their reflections did not portray the honorees as superhuman figures who succeeded by force of will alone. Instead, they pointed to the quieter reality that difficult work becomes more bearable, and often more fulfilling, when those who do it are supported by trusted colleagues over time.

The same was true of the evening itself. The small scale of the gathering, the laughter woven through serious reflection, and the space for trainees alongside faculty to listen together all underscored that such events are not merely social indulgences. They build *pilina* and sow the seeds for trusting relationships that make it easier to ask for help, to offer it, and to see oneself as part of something larger than an individual career. *Mo'olelo* functioned not simply as storytelling, but as a way of making a departmental *mo'okū'auhau* (genealogy) visible. It showed who had come before, how they had navigated similar tensions, and how certain forms of practical wisdom are carried into the future.

Taken together, this work suggests that, for many women, sustaining a life in medicine is not achieved through individual endurance alone, but through meaning, relationship, and shared responsibility across generations. Here, portraiture refers to creating and displaying photographic portraits of women physicians to recognize their contributions and make their presence visible within the medical community. *Mo'olelo* reveals how those who came before navigated challenge, adapted with intention, and made space for others along the way. In this way, the project is not only about honoring the past, but about shaping the future. Future *Mana Kauka Wahine* gatherings and portraiture displays will continue this work by pairing visible recognition with intergenerational reflection, mentorship, and community-building. By strengthening *pilina* and carrying these stories forward, *Mana Kauka Wahine* honors the women who came before and reminds those who follow that they need not navigate a life in medicine alone.

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