

We're a Family, Onstage or Off Hawaiian Theater Students Transform Their Island

MR. ROBIN KITSU'S STORY

edited by Abe Louise Young

We are a Hawaiian Homestead community. It's comparable to an Indian reservation concept. Seventy-five percent of the student population is of Hawaiian or part Hawaiian ancestry. The Hawaiian and Polynesian cultures have been challenged by unemployment, low graduation rates, high incarceration rates. Most students have at least one person they know who are incarcerated. We're on the west side of Oahu. The reputation is that it's not the best place to be, despite the amazing natural beauty.

For our program, the foundation is creating that safe environment—that *ohala*, which means family. When you walk through the doors, no matter what your reputation is outside, here you can be yourself, and we will accept you, and we will support you.

Most important is that mutual respect amongst myself and the students and between them—it's the central thing. It is okay to disagree, it is okay to ask questions, to have your own opinion. We are all human. Don't take anything at face value. It is safe to question.

My philosophy is to create an environment that is safe, where the kids feel cared for, is the foundation. After that, the content will come.

When I started this program almost 20 years ago, my philosophy was to give them a wider experience. For that reason, we've stayed away from doing Hawaiian cultural elements.

A lot of the kids do have families that are involved in hula. A lot of them have background in the Hawaiian cultural arts. There are elders and protocols about how to perform hula dances and chants. One group of elders would say that we were doing it correctly, and another would say that we were not doing it correctly. So, I made a conscious decision to shy away from traditional cultural elements. However, we do deal with local issues that affect our current Hawaiian community. And the Hawaiian culture is primarily an oral history culture. A lot of what we call "talk story," comes into the theatre.



One of the best compliments I receive as director of the program is when the guests come up to me afterwards and remark on how the students carry themselves before theatre, and after. The perception of the school is that the kids are all rowdy and undisciplined. To allow the program to even perform somewhere changes mindsets for some.

We have not met the benchmarks for No Child Left Behind. Our graduation rate is sixty-five to seventy percent. Yet despite all of that, we have students who do succeed in college, and who go on to Ivy League colleges.

I tell the students that some of these memories will be for a lifetime. You may not remember the time you got an A on a paper, but you will remember the relationships with each other, how you solved problems and conflicts together, working in support of one another, communication skills.

To me, those are as valuable as any academic skill they pick up. Their success after high school has a lot to do with self-esteem, tenacity, communication skills. I say, 'There are not too many jobs where you work in isolation. Through this process and program you will learn that no matter how challenging an issue or a time in your life may be, you will be able to deal with it, solve it, overcome it.'

Building the safe environment is the challenge. At this point, our program has a history and a tradition. The veteran students help to create that environment with the new students. The older ones walk up to the younger ones and greet them with welcome.

We don't audition anyone to join. We take anyone! Two-left feet, shyness, anything! Students are only here because they want to be.