

A woman with a camera and an older man in a tropical setting. The woman is holding a professional video camera and has a yellow flower in her ear. The man is wearing a light-colored patterned shirt and has a white flower in his ear. They are standing in front of a lush green background.

Memories of the Dance

The Hula
Preservation Society
is recording the invaluable
mana'o of the Islands'
hula kūpuna

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Leialoha Glorious Kaleikini sits in her comfortable Island-style living room, seemingly oblivious to the Hula Preservation Society video camera that is recording her words. A tiny microphone is tucked in the petals of a pīkake lei draped across the lace bodice of her classic hula mu‘u gown. The ceiling fan is on low, gently moving the curtains and the memories on a quiet morning in the sleepy Honolulu neighborhood where she lives, Kapahulu.

“What we did was dance,” remembers Kaleikini. Her hands sweep up and out as she talks, telling stories of her days dancing hula in Europe, South America and New York. “Some of us thought of other careers. I was going to be a nurse. But then I would never have seen the world.” Kaleikini, who is in her 70s now, was one of the famous Hula Nani Girls, gracious and elegant Hawaiian women who took hula to the world in the 1950s and ‘60s. The Hula Nani Girls created precision lines of dancers that moved in unison, and their impeccable performances continue to inspire modern hula today. Across the globe, they introduced people to true Hawaiian culture and dance.

Kaleikini lived hula as a child. She talks fondly of the old days, when money was not an issue. “We just went to dance when we were called,” she remembers. “If the job paid \$6, each dancer got two and took it home to the family. We had no bank accounts, just some quarters on the dresser.” Making a pua (flower) gesture, she says she still dances in Honolulu when some of the Hula Nani dancers get together.



“If someone calls, we just go where they need us. We keep dancing to stay young.” She steps away from her memories for a moment and leans toward the woman who is recording her words. “I’m so glad you folks are doing this,” Kaleikini tells her. “Lots of us are gone, you know.”

The woman Kaleikini has thanked is Maile Beamer Loo, director of the Hula Preservation Society. She produced and directed this and numerous other video recordings, as well as interviewed the dancers. Loo has logged hundreds of hours talking story with Hawai‘i’s elderly kumu hula (hula teachers) and dancers, all in service of preserving their memories, knowledge and wisdom. “The purpose of the HPS archive,” Loo says, “is to document the great voices of hula before they go silent.” She knows the work is a race against time. The words of her hānai (adoptive) mother, the late Winona Desha “Nona” Beamer, are never very far away from her mind: “When one of our treasured elders dies, a library is locked forever.”

Beamer herself spent a lifetime working to preserve and protect Hawaiian culture. As a young Hawaiian woman studying at



Maile Beamer Loo, top and at right, is the director of the Hula Preservation Society; its purpose, she says, “is to document the great voices of hula before they go silent.” Here she and cameraman Gene Kois record the mana‘o (thoughts) of kupuna (elder) Auntie Winnie Wong Naihe, who danced with Kent Ghirard in the 1950s. Previous page: Loo with Uncle Calvin Hoe. “What we do,” Loo says, “is very simple: We call and ask to come talk story about hula.”



Courtesy Hula Preservation Society

Maile Beamer Loo's mentor and hānai (adoptive) mother was Nona Beamer, the force behind the creation of the Hula Preservation Society. Here Nona interviews The Joshua Sisters, a well-known dancing trio from the World War II era. Below, Nona delivering a lecture on O'ahu in 1958; at right, the much beloved Uncle George Na'ope, founder of Hilo's Merrie Monarch Festival.

Colorado Women's College in the 1940s, she had witnessed firsthand the distortions of her culture: One evening her classmates took her to see what they thought was real hula. The performance was in the sideshow tent of a traveling circus, and Beamer was shocked that this vaudevillian act was being passed off as hula. Later in life she would take her own dancers on the road, all packed in a converted hearse named Begonia, and over fourteen months they would drive thousands of miles across the United States presenting what she called "real hula, not dancing bears."

Beamer was a performer, storyteller, songwriter, activist and educator. In her 30s, when she was the manager of the Waimea Ranch Hotel on the Big Island, she began recording all that she had learned, seen, heard or read about ancient hula. Over the years she filled the walls of her study at the hotel with more and more butcher paper, using it to record her research and reflections. Then one awful night the hotel burned down, and all of Beamer's work went up in smoke. Distraught over the loss, she stopped her record-keeping.

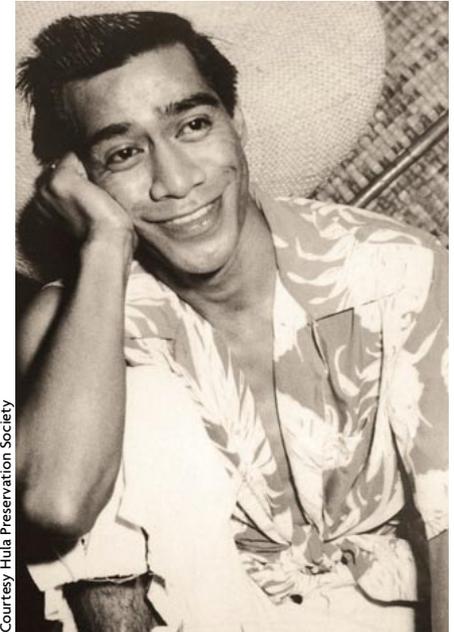
Then one day forty years after the fire, Beamer received a letter from a young woman named Maile Loo asking to study with her. Beamer said yes. The two hit it off so well that eventually Loo officially became Maile Beamer Loo, hānai daughter



Courtesy Hula Preservation Society

of her teacher. And from that relationship, HPS was born.

"HPS really began quite unassumingly one day after hours of intense training at Mom's house in Puna," remembers Loo. Sitting at the dinner table talking hula, Nona Beamer pondered what kumu hula George Na'ope would have to share about a particular form of hula. "Thinking for a



Courtesy Hula Preservation Society

moment, Mom said, 'I only know Beamer hula, what my grandmother taught me,'" remembers Loo. Nona paused. "We should ask Uncle George," she said. That comment grew to a plan for videotaping the legends of hula—teachers, dancers and chanters—and creating an easily accessible archive of everything hula for future generations. The Beamer women realized that the fading memories of Hawai'i's elders, most in their 80s and 90s, were the last direct link to great-grandparents who were, very possibly, witnesses to the traditions of hula during the time of the Hawaiian kingdom. "No one was out there asking our treasured elders what they remembered," says Loo, "stories that could be shared for generations to come."

The duo looked for any earlier documentation that did exist. It was spotty at best, says Loo, and none of it was recorded on video. Listening to audio oral histories housed in the University of Hawai'i libraries, it was clear to Beamer and Loo that words were not enough. "People talk with their hands and their eyes, especially hula people," Loo says. "What we wanted to know, to document, was when they first saw hula, when and how they were selected as students, who were their teachers." The pair asked questions about history, costumes and adornments. When the kūpuna (elders) felt so moved, they would often rise and allow the video camera to record their steps and motions.

Of the nearly sixty kūpuna HPS has interviewed to date, the late Uncle George Nao'pe might be the most colorful. The patriarch of Hilo's world-famous

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Merrie Monarch Festival is remembered for his gold lamé suits, rings on every finger and side-splittingly funny performances of comic hula. In the interview, Na'ope remembers himself as a 3-year-old boy who had to go to hula every day. “I thanked God for Sunday,” he says. “Hawaiians don’t dance on Sunday. I was glad to go to church!” He remembers learning the drum and chant of ancient hula and then, at around age 11, being told to dance. “I didn’t know how. Then I realized after chanting and watching, I did know how, so I danced!” His talent caught the eye of the leading Hawaiian entertainer of the time, Ray Kinney. The two spent years spreading hula and Hawaiian music around the globe.

Another legend whose story has been documented by HPS is Kent Ghirard. Ghirard was a 12-year-old boy in 1931 when he sailed from San Francisco to the Islands on a luxury liner. Watching the graceful hands and bodies of hula dancers as they greeted the ship in Honolulu, he fell in love. Back in California he found a teacher and started his own hula training, and in 1947 he sailed away from a presumed career as head of his father’s business, the

Hula legend Kent Ghirard, seen here in the 1950s, was the founder and kumu (teacher) of the famed Hula Nani Girls, a hālau (troupe) that traveled extensively to bring true Hawaiian dance to the world.

Ghirardelli Chocolate Company, to follow his love for hula. It was Ghirard, the “tall Caucasian person teaching hula” as Leialoha Kaleikini remembers him, who started the famed Hula Nani Girls. In HPS interviews, dancers remember one of Ghirard’s inventions, the green hula panty. Ghirard costumed his dancers in bright tops, often strapless, and green ti leaf skirts—sans the then-conventional below-the-knee bloomers. Rather than be too risqué, his solution was a bright green hula panty that would match the skirt, allow for its great swish and sway and show beautiful, bare legs. The dancers still laugh about dyeing their own panties. “The panty makes dancers giggle,” Nona Beamer used to say, “but it does the job!”

Eleven years after that simple conversation over dinner between teacher-and-student mother-and-daughter, the Hula Preservation Society has collected more than a thousand hours of video footage and tens of thousands of images. At the outset Beamer told Loo that there would be “no boring documentaries!” She asked Loo to find the real story of hula life, recording the enthusiasm, creativity and personal stories of each dancer or kumu. “What we do,” Loo explains, “is very simple: We call and ask to come talk story about hula and to record the conversation.” Once arrived,



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Loo and cameraman Gene Kois ask, “Where would you like to sit? Where are you comfortable?” The dancer or kumu is filmed in natural light with ambient sound that can run from a barking dog to a neighbor’s television. Loo thinks that a hundred years from now those sounds on the recording will tell a story of their own.

Hula costumes from the 1920s, scrapbooks, photos, vintage 78 records, audio-cassettes and hula implements have all been donated to the HPS by hula elders. What began for two women as a labor of love for hula has grown into a federally recognized nonprofit. Nona Beamer died in 2008, and Loo now carries on the work herself. The first documentation was done on a shoestring, Loo says, and the organization still runs “very lean,” though it has been slowly augmented with grants from foundations, private donors, the State of Hawai‘i and the federal government.

In the twenty-first century, the love for hula seems to grow exponentially every day. Hundreds of thousands of dancers in Japan, Mexico, Europe and all over the world eagerly search for hula fact and wisdom. Letters, emails and text messages come in to the HPS web site regularly, asking for answers, information and “real hula teachings.” Loo is happy to see so many visitors. At the moment, she says, HPS is putting its limited resources into capturing as many stories as possible. In the future, though, she plans to grow the HPS website, www.hulapreservation.org, and to share all of the organization’s precious interviews on the web. “We know that our online library can be used by hundreds of thousands if not millions of dancers,” she says, “who have an honest desire to learn about hula and Hawaiian culture.” **HH**



Courtesy Hula Preservation Society

On May 11, 2012, as part of the International Waikīkī Hula Conference, HPS will stage a tribute to Kent Ghirard, who died August 29, 2011. It will be held at the Hawai‘i Convention Center, and the Hula Nani Girls, including Leialoha Kaleikini, will be dancing. For information, call (808) 247-9440 or visit the HPS web site.