

In grandma's footsteps



KHET

Keola Beamer and his mother, Nona, team up for a musical duet and storytelling in this scene from a "Spectrum Hawaii" special, which aired in September on KHET-Channel 11. She'll be honored at E Ho'i Mai I Ka Piko Hula, the fifth World Invitational Hula Festival, beginning today.

Winona Kapuailohia Desha Beamer

■ **BORN:** Aug. 15, 1923, Honolulu.

■ **FAMILY:** Granddaughter of composer Helen Desha Beamer ("Sweetheart Grandma"). Daughter of Louise and the late Pono Beamer. Mother of musicians Breckenridge Keolamaikalani Beamer (Keola) and Brenton Kaponomalamalani Desha Beamer (Kapon). Cousin to falsettist Edwin Mahiai Desha Beamer (Mahi).

■ **MORE FAMILY:** In the last few years, she's added a *hanai* (informally adopted) son to her clan. Kaliko Trapp, a British-born descendent of the famed singing Trapp family, once won a Beamer scholarship while teaching Hawaiian language in California. She urged him to join her on the Big Island, where he now teaches and shares her

Pahoa home.

■ **HER CURRENT PROJECT:** "The Golden Lehua and Other Stories of the Beamer Family," a music-and-storytelling recording co-produced with son Keola, due for release Nov. 19.

■ **ON THE "BEAMER STYLE" OF HULA:** "The motions truly reflect what the song is about." (Incredibly, she said, this was not always the case in Hawaii's territorial days.)

■ **ON HAWAIIAN SOVEREIGNTY:** "I believe sovereignty is coming, although nobody knows what form it will take. I've always liked (the sovereignty group) Ka Lahui. Mililani (Trask, its leader,) talks with a nice quietness about her. I've admired that, that there has been no negativism. I'm hoping that those militants will fade away. . . . We don't need those bad feelings in our hearts."

Hula festival celebrates Nona Beamer's work nurturing a culture

By Vicki Viotti
Advertiser Staff Writer

PAHOA, Hawaii — Among all her unquestioned accomplishments, Nona Beamer still wonders whether she has fulfilled one of her fondest goals.

"I've always wanted to be the kind of grandmother that my 'Sweetheart Grandma' was to me," she said, her face crinkling with a smile. "I hope that I am."

The reigning matriarch of Hawaii's Beamer clan, Winona Beamer gazed out the window at the 'ohia trees surrounding the home she built on her beloved Big Island, remembering how "Sweetheart Grandma," composer Helen Desha Beamer, made her feel loved, special and proud to be Hawaiian.

She has but one grandchild — Kamana,

the son of Kapon Beamer. But her grandmotherliness — she's 73 — seems to flow beyond all blood lines, because she's found herself looking after the futures of hundreds of others.

These include the students to whom she taught Hawaiian culture at the Kamehameha Schools until her retirement eight years ago; the recipients of the seven Beamer Scholarships she awards each year; and the countless others who have felt the influence of her expertise in hula, musical composition, chant and other Hawaiian arts.

It's this work that's being celebrated tonight in a tribute that launches E Ho'i Mai I Ka Piko Hula, the fifth World Invitational Hula Festival. It's not the first such honor she's received, and with a career as richly endowed as hers, nobody would wager that it's the last.

Her life's joys, of course, have come with a fair measure of pain. A brief, unhappy marriage left her raising her sons, musicians Keola and Kapon Beamer, without their father, Odell Steppe. Nona kept her maiden

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name for business purposes ("Nobody would come to learn hula in 'The Steppe Studio,'" she explained). Her sons decided, at ages 7 and 8, that they wanted the same last name as their cousins.

Once, while the couple was attempting reconciliation, the family visited the Steppe in-laws in Pennsylvania. It was a close encounter with racism, one that proved to be the final straw.

"They were horrible to us," she recalled. "They made Keola and I eat in the kitchen."

Nona Beamer's not sure why Steppe married her, but she's got a theory.

"I asked him once, and he told me, 'I fell in love with you.' But I think he fell in love with what I stood for in Hawaii: the Hawaiian girl with the flower in her hair who sang and danced."

Business has not always been kind, either. A portion of tonight's proceeds will benefit Beamer's scholarship foundation, which ordinarily is financed by her recording company.

However, she said, she recently saw a slump in sales of a storytelling videocassette series she had produced with great hopes of the Japanese market. It turned out that one of her Japanese customers had duplicated the tapes and sold the pirated versions throughout that country.

Beamer has decided not to pursue legal action.

E Ho'i Mai I Ka Piko Hula, the World Invitational Hula Festival

WHEN/WHERE: 5 p.m. today through Saturday, Waikiki Shell. Tonight's program will begin with a tribute to Winona Beamer, followed by the first entries in the solo competition. **Tomorrow** — Soloists and group competition. **Saturday** — Group competition.

TICKETS: \$7.50 general (lawn and picnic seating); \$10 special seating; \$15 loge seats. Limited VIP seating in the Judges' Circle, \$25. Children under 9 admitted free. Available from Blaisdell Box Office, 591-2211; charge by phone via The Connection, 545-4000.

INFORMATION: 486-3185.

"People tell me I should," she said with a shrug. "I just don't want to fill my time with meanness and madness, so I let it go." There was a twinkle in her eye. "But I think he'll get his someday. Maybe a truck will fall on him, or something!"

Beamer tries not to dwell on sadness, at least not openly. The distance between her sons, long-time musical partners who have been estranged for some years now, she attributes to the different directions their lives have taken. Kapono's

musical producer is in Munich; Keola's company is American.

"Their businesses are different. The women in their lives are different," she said.

"Kaponono has a different track, maybe a faster track, more affluent. He just added a floor to his house, for \$300,000. Wow! And I just built this whole house for \$90,000." She paused. "I would say Keola's a little more laid back. Maybe a little more grounded."

Mostly, Nona Beamer's life has been one of triumph over challenges. Her love affair with the Kamehameha Schools even had rocky beginnings. As a student, she was told in no uncertain terms that she was not college material; nor were her classmates.

"We were there to become 'good and industrious men and women,'" she said. Of course, she went on to college.

Then there was the time in 1935 she was kicked out of Kamehameha for performing a hula with the women of her Hawaiian culture club at a school function. Of course, she went on to teach hula to fellow students at Colorado Women's College.

This is one reason a tribute at a world hula competition seems so fitting, said Paulie Jennings, the event's executive director.

"She was really the first to spread the real hula around the world," Jennings said.