

Ellen Castillo

Ellen Castillo has been teaching hula in Kailua, O'ahu since 1960. She is also a kupuna for the DOE Hawaiiana program.

I started hula with Auntie Bella Richards when I was nine years old. She had about thirty students and we danced on her lawn on the side of her house. She taught us mostly hula 'auana and later on she taught Tahitian dancing. Auntie Bella learned traditional hula from her kumu, Bella Kuamo'o, but she loved 'auana and didn't care to teach much kahiko at that time.

I stayed with Auntie Bella for fifteen years. I served as her alaka'i and I was required to teach with her for a couple of years as a requirement for my certificate. Auntie Bella wouldn't let her students' teach without her overseeing them first. I graduated and received my certificate from her in 1958.

Auntie Bella was with me during the first few hula lessons that I taught. After that, she let me teach on my own. My first teaching experience was at Auntie Bella's home and she made me teach a new class of thirty students. She also had private students and I would go to their homes to give lessons. After teaching for her, I started to branch out on my own in 1959 or 1960.

I took my kahiko training under Auntie Lani Kalama. Although I enjoyed learning from her, at first it was a little hard for me to acquire the kahiko style because it was different. I also learned chanting from Auntie Lani.

When I decided to teach, I chose a part of my Hawaiian name which was also the name of my father's mother. She was a dancer who danced only for special people. She was known as Puka'i but I researched the name and found that it was Puka'ikapuaokalani. So I used that name for my halau.

I enjoy watching my students perform. As a kumu, you work hard with your students to achieve what you envision. People wonder why you keep entering competition after competition.

When I see the girls and the finished product presented on stage, I feel very fortunate to be able to perpetuate my culture and preserve the beauty of hula. Hula also motivates me to keep going.

I stress to my students to learn the Hawaiian language. The language is very important in hula and you will always make use of it in the future.

The hula kahiko should be more sacred. It's a religious thing. I try to keep my hula kahiko very serious. We have to work extra hard on kahiko because it's more strenuous.