

## LEHUA HULIHE'E

*In 1992, Lehua Hulihe'e opened her halau, Ka Pa Lehua, for the young women living in the Kahala neighborhood. Lehua and her hula sister, Doreen Doo, have entered their haumana in the King Kamehameha Hula Competition since 1994.*

My tutu was there to help me with my hula. She helped me make my skirts and my leis. She helped me tie the feathers together when I made kahili. When I made my 'uli'uli and ipu heke, she would always watch. There was this one time I was making an ipu heke. I had the bottom gourd but waited three years to find the top gourd. I couldn't believe it because the bottom gourd had such a beautiful kani, but when I put it together, it just went "thunk". I was so sad. I told my tutu and she said, "Open up the mouth." I replied, "But the instructions are to cut only four inches." She said, "If I don't open my mouth, you can't hear me." So I opened the mouth and I still use that ipu today.

I was born and raised in Kalihi. My tutu is pure Hawaiian. She and my grandfather came from Maui. She did things in the old ways. Hawaiian was always spoken in our home. Cleaning lauhala, quilting, feather work and Hawaiian music were around me all the time. I was fortunate because I always felt Hawaiian.

My tutu always emphasized that you have to learn to be humble. You watch, look, listen and learn. She had the greatest affect on my interest in pursuing anything in the arts. She did say to me that hula was one thing that was still living; that had come and not stopped. It was still alive and it was continuum. It was important that we take care of it.

My beginning in hula was done through the family. My tutu took me to a friend to learn hula when I was really young. When I wanted to learn about the 'uli'uli or things like that, she took me to get one and so I could learn how to use it. But I think I always had a dream that one day, I would learn traditional hula.

I started learning traditional hula with Kaha'i Topolinski in 1981. I was already in my thirties and I really had no dreams of becoming a kumu hula. We started with seventy-five students and within a month, the class was down to thirty and by Christmas, it was down to fifteen. We started in September and we learned the basic steps until April. Basically, the first year in hula was only steps. There were no movements in the top part of the body. I enjoyed that because once the steps were mastered, you didn't have to think about it anymore.

I enjoyed Kaha'i's style. It was very flowing and there were parameters which he did not cross. I don't think his style is easy to learn. You have to practice more than just going to hula class. You have to practice at home to get it.

After three years with the halau, I was elevated to alaka'i. During a hula practice, Kaha'i asked everybody to leave the room and he called me in. I was a little reluctant when he asked me to become an alaka'i because I was happy being a dancer. I had been elevated to senior dancer just before and actually, I felt that I still needed more dancing.

Being an alaka'i meant having to be at all the hula classes and if he taught night classes, you were there too. You had to go to a meeting every week because he had weekly meetings. If he wasn't there, you had to teach the class. Go through the warmups and continue what was taught the previous week. I did translations for him and helped instruct instrument

making classes. I also took care of the roll and tuition. There were times when I was home only a few nights.

I was an alaka'i for eight years before graduating in 1992. As an alaka'i, you learned everything. You learned about costumes, you learned instruments and chanting. Kaha'i told me to go to the museum to learn and I did. He pushed me into chanting so I learned chanting from Kalani Akana. Chanting was one thing that I felt really comfortable with. More so than dancing. I had to practice for a long time, but I found it was very comfortable, like being at home.

Teaching the students of Punahou High School was an assignment given to us by Kaha'i. Every one or two years, Dave Eldredge, the adviser at Punahou, would invite new people to come and teach. One year, Mr. Eldredge asked Kaha'i to help with the May Day program. Kaha'i said yes and it was assigned to us. Besides doing all the halau stuff, Doreen and I would go to Punahou every Sunday and teach. It was the most wonderful experience that we could have ever wished for. Although it was a lot of work, because we still had to go back to the halau, we had an opportunity to do all the things we were taught to do. Kaha'i told us what dance to teach and he had to approve the costumes. The only thing that we were given free rein was the ka'i and ho'i. We would come up with the design of the costumes and after a couple of years, Kaha'i let us choose or give us suggestions of what might be good. But we would always teach what had been taught to us by Kaha'i.

Kaha'i was having a special anniversary in which I chanted as part of that performance. I didn't know he was going to present me with a certificate. It was a total surprise. He publicly announced that Kalani Akana and I were released from the halau; that we had graduated as kumu hula. We had a very public presentation of leis and our kihei.



I was released from Ka Pa Hula Hawai'i in August 1992 and in September, I walked around my neighborhood and left flyers in the mailboxes. I had seven young ladies come to take hula from me. I was so thrilled that anybody came. That was the beginning of our halau, Ka Pa Lehua. We've grown slowly. We don't advertise and we don't fundraise. We're not a commercial halau. Whatever the kids pay for tuition, we use for their costumes and instruments.

The first year I was on my own, I was allowed to come back to teach the students of Punahou with Doreen. At the end of that session, she was released by Kaha'i. He gave us charge of Punahou if we were to be invited again. But it was going to go under our halau, Ka Pa Lehua. Doreen and I have been together ever since her release.

When I started the halau, Doreen was still with Kaha'i. As soon as she graduated, she came in. We've become friends over the years and there are things we do naturally together. I don't have to say anything and she doesn't have to say anything. We just have something precious.

I think it is a great responsibility to be a teacher of anything because your thoughts and your values are transferred to your students. It's important to look at what is important and what the focus will be on because you're the one who chooses the focus for the students. That becomes very important to them and they will pull from it in their daily lives.

It takes a lot of hard work to be true to tradition and you need to hold fast to being humble. If you hold fast to that, it can only bring you happiness. Remember those things that our kupuna taught us. There's more to the hula than just dancing. There's the individual who you're helping to give some of the traditional values that come from our culture. As you grow up, you find that these are universal values. There's a lot of young people who are

reaching out to learn about cultural heritage whether it's their nationality or not. It doesn't matter what color they are or culture they're from. They're eager to learn about those things that make the Hawaiian culture special. Besides working hard and being humble, be honest and be trustworthy. And to the best of your ability and the best of your knowledge, hold fast to those traditions.