

Leialoha Amina

Leialoha Lim Amina is one of the founders of the hula hālau Nā Lei O Kaholokū. Hālau began in 1979 on O‘ahu, and was relocated in 1990, to Waikoloa, South Kohala, on the Island of Hawai‘i. Leialoha resides on O‘ahu and travels to instruct the hālau along with her sister, Kumu Hula Nani Lim-Yap.

My first kumu hula was my mother, Mary Ann Neula Lim. We were living in a ranch house at Pu‘uhue Ranch that had a veranda. It was there on that veranda that Nani and I first got our introduction to hula from our mother. I remember her showing us various hula numbers, but the one that I fondly remember was a hula noho with one pū‘ili. To watch my mother sway to and fro, to hear the rhythm of the pū‘ili and the melodic chanting was inspiring. I desperately wanted to learn.

Our instruction began with learning our first foot movements. The ‘vamp’ as mother called it. (We know it as the kaholo today.) One, two, three, tap. One, two, three, tap. Mother reminding us to bend our knees. Then we learned to do the hela. Point right, point left. Sway your hips. The first day with mother was fantastic. But in the days thereafter, she introduced the concept of discipline with a bamboo. Whacking us with that bamboo when we were not doing the steps or hand motions the way we should. I know I was in shock the first time she hit me on my leg. I remember crying because it stung!

Eventually, mom and dad decided to send us to our Aunt Margaret Moku Tablit who lived at Niuli‘i, North Kohala. She had a hula studio in Kohala and at times would need to use the gym to teach because she had between thirty to forty students. Auntie Margaret taught more hula auwana and Polynesian numbers than hula kāhiko. We were trained in a style of hula that was sweet and simple in such numbers as ‘Lovely Hula Girl,’ ‘Mi Nei,’ ‘Sweet Singing Bamboo’ and more playful and up-tempoed in numbers like ‘Ana Pau Lā,’ ‘Little Brown Gal’ and ‘Papalina Lahilahi.’ It was from her hula studio that she chose hula dancers to entertain at the Mauna Kea Beach Hotel. Myself and my three sisters were chosen to perform there at the Tuesday night lu‘au shows.

Today, Nani has continued that legacy left by Auntie Margaret at the Mauna Kea Beach Hotel.

Auntie Margaret taught a few hula kahiko numbers such as Kawika and Pūnana Ka Manu which we used in the Mauna Kea Beach Hotel lu'au shows. Her forte was not hula kāhiko, but she encouraged her students to learn from other instructors. Her first recommendation was to take a 6 week hula kāhiko workshop from Auntie 'Iolani Luahine that was held at the Kahilu Theatre in Kamuela. Attending that workshop had such a profound effect on me and that effect, in essence, has been a major contribution to the form of hula you see in the *Ladies of Hula Hālau Nā Lei O Kaholoku*.

The workshop began by Auntie 'Iolani introducing herself and giving us an agenda on what would take place for the next 6 weeks. It was a standard introduction. Nothing out of the ordinary until she danced for us the first hula kāhiko number we would learn, Aia La O Pele. I remember Suse Soares was her ho'opa'a and he was ready to begin. Auntie 'Iolani just stood there with a searching look in her eyes as if trying to see something. Everything was so silent you could have heard a pin drop. I remember myself building up with anticipation to see her dance as she held that stance for what seemed like minutes. Finally, she signals with a finger to the ho'opa'a to begin. I watched her transform before my eyes from a little sweet-talking, gray-haired Hawaiian lady to the most graceful moving, story-telling hula dancer. Her whole being danced. But it was her eyes and facial expressions along with her body movements that told you the story of Pele. It was as if her feet were not touching the ground. I felt an energy from her that had me totally captivated. That experience has been with me until this very day. It is unforgettable. I never missed a class for that workshop and in fact, took a second workshop from her. I had the privilege of performing for Auntie Iolani at Hulihe'e Palace one year for Aloha Week. That was unforgettable.

Since that time, I went through a transition period from being the dancer to becoming an instructor. I was asked by Lydia Kamakawiwo'ole Kauakahi to help instruct her haumana of Hula

Hālau Ka Hanu Ola in hula kāhiko for the Kualoa Hula Kahiko Competition. I solicited the help of Darrell Lupenui, and together we prepared the halau of high school students from Nanakuli High School. They placed in all three categories of presentation, taking first place in two and second in the other. That was my first introduction to hula competition as an instructor.

It was shortly thereafter that I was introduced to Pilahi Paki by Uncle Moe Keale and his fiancée, Kolena. Now that I had my first experience as an instructor, my focus was moving towards understanding and translating mele and this is what I discussed with Auntie Pilahi on our first meeting. She explained that she was not a hula instructor, but in regards to translating mele, I needed to understand that basically, all spoken languages were created by human beings with minds to think for themselves, hearts with emotions to feel and vocal chords to express those thoughts and feelings based on the input into a human body received from the five senses. In our Hawaiian culture, composers utilized this process in mele in our mother tongue. Therefore, the composer is to be respected. Hula is an art form of expression of a composer's mele, chanted or sung via the vocal chords of a ho'opa'a or singer, conveyed to the olapa or dancer who thereafter, through gestures of the kino or body, express and portray the composer's mele. I was spell bound.

That initial meeting ended with an indirect challenge from Auntie Pilahi. She explained that she understood what I was asking, but whether I understood that I was at a disadvantage with what I requested. She had no doubts on my ability in the physical aspect of hula, but did I understand that I was not born into speaking our mother tongue? Did I understand that this would be a life long endeavor to learn the spirit of the language of my ancestors by doing extensive research into their past history? Did I truly know who I was, where I came from, so therefore I would know where I was going in the future?

Auntie Pilahi reached into my very soul that day and has been the turning point in my life in everything that I do. I studied with her for two years and before the ending of the second year, I was blessed by her with my 'ōlelo Hawai'i inoa 'Leialoha' and with her Aloha Olioli as a kuleana

that I carry to this day. Through a dream she had of seeing beautiful holokus dancing, the halau was bestowed with the name Hālau Nā Lei O Kaholoku. The Aloha Olioli has a powerful spiritual message which is the very foundation of Hālau Nā Lei O Kaholoku. The very first assignment for each of our haumana has been the translation of this olioli, and it is this message within the Aloha Olioli that is within each of us in the halau. We have shared this message not only here in Hawai'i nei, but in Spain, France, the U. S. mainland, New Zealand and Japan.

Hālau Nā Lei O Kaholoku is a culmination of the experiences of my sisters, Nani and Lorna, our alaka'i, and myself . We feel truly blessed that in our lifetime we have met instrumental people who have shared the art of hula with us in some form or fashion. We are always mindful that we carry a responsibility, because what we instruct today, will have a profound effect on tomorrow. It is our hope that we have done and will continue to do justice to our ancestors by the hula we portray through hālau.