



Pa'auilo Mauka Kalopa Community Association

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Monthly News & Updates

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June 2020 Newsletter



Feeding our Keiki and Kupuna - A Volunteer's Experience in Providing Community Meals

By Ruth Bennett, PMKCA Vice President

This article is also published as a "regular" article in the Hamakua Times June issue.

Imagine! 400+ freshly prepared, healthy, hot meals distributed to folks in waiting cars or delivered to homes in a single afternoon, every Friday! That's more than triple the number of meals typically prepared weekly since the "Feeding our Keiki and Kupuna" meal program began at the Honoka'a Hongwanji in February, 2019.

Then, consider what is driving the increase in meals provided: the devastating impact on our communities of the Coronavirus pandemic and the loss of income and financial stability for so many of us, our neighbors and friends.

And picture the good folks, members of the Honoka'a Hongwanji Peace Committee and other volunteers, showing up every Friday to prepare the food, assemble the meals and distribute them to the community. Consider the farmers, grocers and non-profits (The Food Basket) who donate the produce and supplies from which the meals are made. And think of the other individuals and organizations which are providing the funds to purchase the rest of needed supplies. *Truly amazing and inspiring!*

I wanted to be a part of this impressive event. Members of our local association, Pa'auilo Mauka Kalopa Community Association (PMKCA.org), had been volunteering for some time and PMKCA had just carried out a fund-raising "matching" drive which resulted in a donation of nearly \$1,000 to the meals program.



Joining the group of volunteers was not an easy decision for me. The virus seems to be targeting



folks like me, a woman in her mid-70s with a disability. I could have stayed home. But the necessary social restrictions, imposed to *protect* folks like me and so many others, were also wrecking the lives and livelihoods of so many of my friends and neighbors whose jobs and small businesses have been shut down. With so much disruption and distress, I really needed to be a part of something good.

I arrived at the Hongwanji in the early afternoon (Friday, May 15), not knowing what to expect, but assuming that I would be welcomed and taught whatever I needed to know. The first person I met

turned out to be a neighbor and member of PMKCA, Linda, who had been involved with the meals program for nearly a year! She said to me later, “As a newcomer to the island, I’m grateful to be working with others to benefit the community.”



I was escorted between rows of donated produce and baked goods (also being distributed later that day) and down to the large, clean kitchen area to join the meal preparation team. We were all masked and gloved and aproned for safety, but we greeted each other with smiling eyes and warm words.

I met Miles Okumura, a co-founder of the “Feeding our Keiki and Kupuna” program who helped it evolve as the needs of the community changed over time. Miles sees the program as a continuation and a broadening of the Hongwanji’s mission of “opening doors” – of welcoming and practicing sharing. Each meal costs about \$500 and involves around 35 volunteers.

This Friday’s meal was on a Mexican theme – rice and beans, pulled chicken, fresh salsa and greens and a dessert. Earlier in the morning, a group of volunteers had cleaned and disinfected the entire kitchen area and prepared the food, washing and cutting many pounds of tomatoes and other vegetables, preparing the chicken, and starting several huge rice cookers. The quantities of food were astounding!

Eric, another PMKCA member, was standing beside a giant wok, stirring a huge quantity of chicken over a monstrous propane burner. Eric says what motivates him is his belief that “no one should go hungry – particularly children – and tons of food should not go to waste”.

It was obvious to me that the organizers of the “Feeding our Keiki and Kupuna” program were very experienced in running a complex, time-driven, meal preparation and distribution effort.



I was introduced to Ravi, a co-founder and consistent organizer of the meals effort. Ravi’s Sikh tradition and practice emphasizes the importance of community meals as “an anchor for the community”. In many Sikh temples, meals are served three times a day, every day, to all who come. Ravi says, “When we serve people, we are serving the divine.” That sentiment seemed to pervade the afternoon.

I was given an overview of the work ahead – a choreographed assembly line of the plating of each meal. It was impressed on all of us how quickly each plate of food would need to be assembled and wrapped (“20 seconds per plate”) in order to provide the 400+ plates that were to be handed out or delivered to homes that afternoon. I started out by tearing hundreds of squares of tin foil to cover the filled plates.



When we began the assembly process, I was transferred to the “salsa station”, in front of a large, fragrant bin of freshly-chopped tomatoes, onions, corn and pineapple, dusted with chopped cilantro. “Upstream” in the assembly line, each plate began with a scoop of rice and as the plate was passed along, a scoop of pulled chicken and a ladle of beans were added. I placed a scoop of salsa in a corner and passed the plate to my neighbor who added a bit of salad and slices of jicama. Each filled plate was then wrapped in foil and stored in a cooler (warmer) for distribution within the next hour or so.

Ravi, who was the conductor of this particular meal, cheered us on. “Serve with love, light and laughter!” he called out – breaking apart the tension and anxiety that often accompanies “assembly line” work. We settled into the rhythm of the passed plates and rejoiced as they went out the door to be delivered to homes or handed out in the street level parking lot.

Upstairs, Linda and Miles and other volunteers had prepared bags and boxes of donated produce – fresh vegetables, sprays of longan and hands of bananas brought by farmers and local families, as well as piles of donated rolls and jars of honey. As the line of cars proceeded through the Hongwanji parking lot, the occupants of each car got a bag or box placed in the trunk of their car, along with their requested prepared meals.



I never saw the actual distribution event which was occurring upstairs but I heard that the line of cars filled the parking lot and continued onto Plumeria St. I was busy throughout the afternoon adding my scoop of salsa to each plate, along with a wish to each recipient for health and hope and happiness. I had grown up poor, from a long line of hard-scrabble farmers and coal miners in West Virginia. While I had been somewhat fortunate at times in my life, *my people* were in the cars upstairs. I

never forget that.

Community meals aren’t just about feeding people who need food; they are also about building community and binding people together in mutual support and care. Miles put it

this way: “This will be a rough ride for a while to come for our community. Find ways to help others now – *right now!* Do what you can do to help.”

I will do what I can. I hope to meet you in the kitchen of the Hongwanji, or wherever help is needed. We will all rejoice in the opportunity these bad times give us to do something good.

To volunteer for or contribute to the “Feeding our Keiki and Kupuna” meals program, email Miles Okumura at misterokumura@yahoo.com.

Volunteers and donations are always welcome – and a group of friends or neighbors or a community organization can sponsor an entire meal to celebrate something special in an especially meaningful way. The experience is a gift in itself. I can testify to that!

Next Meetings

Here's a lineup of the next few PMKCA meetings:

Thu, Jul 9, 2020 7PM PMKCA Board of Directors Meeting
Hawaiian Vanilla Co (TBD)

Sat, Jul 25, 2020 11AM PMKCA Annual Potluck Picnic and
General Meeting. Kalopa State Park (TBD)

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