Cànan Hawaiʻi – a’ dol às ʻur bho ghinealach gu ginealach

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Amy Mahealani Jones gives a personal account of the triumphs and tribulations of the struggle for the revitalization of the Hawaiian language

Aloha. My name is Amy Mahealani Jones. I grew up in Utah. My ancestors came from Scotland, Ireland, Wales, England and Denmark. I moved to Hawai‘i when I was 19 and have lived here since except for a couple of years I spent in Utah and Arizona.

Soon after I moved to Hawai‘i I became involved in a Hawaiian grassroots political movement. Hawaiian culture and language were in a perilous position just a few short years after becoming a state in 1959. Very few people I met spoke any Hawaiian language and this made me sad.

Several years later after moving from Honolulu, the capital city, to Hilo on the Big Island I learned I was pregnant. During my pregnancy I had a dream that my child would be taken in by a Hawaiian family so I could go to work, and this family spoke Hawaiian. Like many people around the world, Hawaiians believe that dreams are messages from spirit. This dream had that quality for me, and it stayed with me. When my 2 year old son ‘Olwi and I were at the beach one day, a stranger struck up a conversation mentioning that a new preschool would be starting soon in Hilo, one which would be conducted solely in Hawaiian. I thought this was also a message from spirit, otherwise why would a man I did not know sit next to me on a deserted beach and tell me what my dream had revealed to me two years earlier? He gave me the name of the woman who was in charge, and we parted.

I called this woman, whose name is Kauanoe Kamana. She and her husband Pila Wilson are professors at the University of Hawai‘i at Hilo, and were two of the founding visionaries of the Hawaiian language revitalization program. About 1 ½ years later she began to call meetings for interested parents to meet and discuss the school. The parents looked at school sites and participated in some of the discussions. Students were to be chosen in part because of existing language support in the home. I did not yet speak any Hawaiian, and thought my son would be placed at the bottom of the list. Again, spirit stepped in. There were 15 applicants and 15 positions to fill, and he was admitted to the school. I was overjoyed!

The families of the preschool, Punana Leo (Language Nest), were required to have at least one member of the family actively learn Hawaiian, and all families had to contribute eight hours a month towards upkeep of the school in some way, such as yard work, making snacks, etc. Pila Wilson's contribution was making tamao kai (ocean cookies). Aloha. My story is over.
doing office work, or for those who did speak some Hawaiian, helping teachers in the classroom. The "foundling" families spent a lot of time together making sure the school would survive and thrive. One of our main tasks was to cut and paste Hawaiian words into English language books for the children because there were no other printed resources. A number of the parents learned Hawaiian well and are now teachers in the immersion program.

As a parent, I was part of the team tasked with convincing the Department of Education to extend immersion year by year, and to determine when to introduce the study of English in the schools. The DOE felt the children would be disadvantaged without English, and wanted us to begin English instruction in 3rd grade, when the students were eight years old. The founders had met Fred Genesee, a researcher from Montreal who did research among bi- and tri-lingual students (Mohawk, French and English). He showed that once grammar skills in the heritage language were established, they could be transferred into the dominant language without difficulty. If a second language were to be introduced too early, grammar in both languages would suffer due to confusion in their young minds. He recommended we begin English in the 5th grade. Eventually the DOE relented and allowed us to delay English instruction until the 5th grade.

When the program began in Hilo, another school started in Honolulu. Demand throughout the state has helped to bring immersion to other islands as well. We brought the students together periodically so that they would see that the world of Hawaiian speakers was larger than the small number of students they knew in Hilo. We had family camping trips and we took annual trips to a beach park on our own island, where we could all play as a big family.

Weekend family gatherings at the school were common, because we knew the children needed the Hawaiian language outside of the classroom, and the camaraderie we found with each other cemented our commitment. The children grew up together and knew each other well. This shared experience was important in building a sense of community and identity.

Ceathrar dhén chloinn a bha ann a' chriad Phunana Leo, agus lathais a-nisbhe nan Inbhir. 'S e Olwi an dårna neach air taobh chlí. 'S i am boireannach air an taobh dheas Kauanoe Kamano, acadamaighch à Oltheirt Hâwai'i a chaime a' chleadh ro-gsoll air choils.

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(Mohawk, Fraingis is Beurla). Dherebh esan, nuair a bha sgilean grámair stéidhichte anns ann ' chànan dualchasach, gan gabhadh ann an cur an sás anns a' mhòr-chànan gan dulfheadas.

Nà mar buard dhàrna cân air a toirt a-steach ro thàinig, bhdionn i an cur a' chànan àite tuathal. Mhol e gun tòsicheamaid air a' Bheurla anns a' chòigeamh bliadhna.

Aig a' cheann thall ghèillein an Roinn agus leig lad in ann dàil a chuir air oideachadh ann am Beurla chun na cóigeamh bliadhna.

Aig an aon am 's a thòisich am prògam ann an Hilo, thòisich sgòil anns an iomárd. Tha iarradh air feadh na stàitse air foghlam tro mheadhan na Hawaiianais a thòirt do dh'eilleanach eile cuideachd.

Thug sinn air sgileanàir còmhla aig amannan gus an faideadh iad gun robh barrachd luchd-labhairt Hawaiianais ann an òireadh bheag air an robh iad eolach ann an Hilo. Thug sinn teaghlachd a champachadh agus chaith sinn gach bliadhna gu pàirc tràghaird air an eilean againn fhèin, far am biodh a' cluich còmhla mar theaghlach mòr.

Cu tir chòmòid a' criunneachadh aig an sgòil air an deireadh sheadhdaoin oir bhà fòs againn gum biodh feum aig a' chòinn air Hawaiianais taobh a-muigh an t-sèomra-theagaisg, agus fhàir sinn spìonadh bhan chàirda de a dh'òirich eadarann. Bha a' chòinn a' chàdadh le aon eileanach aig a dhèanamh ma dh'ìoc air an bhàsadh.
felt loved by all the families and are still close to their classmates years after they have graduated. Many of the immersion students have themselves become teachers in immersion.

I have long thought that the success of our “experiment” in Hawaiian language revitalization would not be known until our children became parents, and to see if they choose to speak Hawaiian to their children. The first graduates from high school are now starting families, and of those I know all are using Hawaiian with their children. These young people have a secure sense of self built from fluency in both language and culture that their peers who speak only English do not possess. They realize the value in passing on this cultural identity to their own children and demonstrate this with their actions.

My son was one of the students who had a hard time being in the lead class, and so he completed high school outside of immersion. While in college he realized the vision we as founding parents had, and decided to take up linguistics with Hawaiian as his language of study. He is now nearing completion of his doctorate at Oxford. His intellect was enhanced through having native fluency in two languages and possessing world views in both cultures.

When we began the Punana Leo, there were an estimated 800 native speakers of Hawaiian, most of them from a small island (Ni‘ihau) where everybody speaks it. There are now over 8000 speakers, and many more studying in high schools and colleges across the state. Funding for the preschool comes from federal grants and tuition paid by families. State agencies and private individuals contribute to help keep the schools open, and families also hold fundraisers throughout the year.

At the University, in addition to a bachelor’s program in Hawaiian Studies, we have a teacher training program, two masters programs, and a PhD in Indigenous Language and Culture Revitalization. The Hawaiian Language College publishes Hawaiian stories for classroom use and manages web sites containing Hawaiian dictionaries and other resources. It has also created a Hawaiian language email service and desktop client. North American tribal people and others look to Hilo as a role model for successful language revitalization.

What have I learned from my years as a founding parent in the Hawaiian immersion program? I have found that sometimes reality can surpass our individual dreams, I believe that listening to my heart is more important than following the crowd. My parents felt I was holding my son back from his potential, and encouraged me to put him into mainstream English medium education. They would certainly be proud of him now!
'S e an gniomh a dhearbhas an dòchas: còignear a bha nan sgoilearan ann am Punana Leo ('s e 'Olwi an dàrna fear an taobh dheas). Tha am fear air an làimh chli agus am boireannach anns a' mheadhan a-nise nam pàranta, agus tha iad le chèile a' bruidhinn Hawaiianais rin cuid clùinne

Dealbh: 'Aha Punana Leo

I have learned that many people working together can change history and preserve a culture, despite the odds or the will of the state. I know that I was destined to play a role in keeping the Hawaiian language alive, and feel lucky to have been a part of this movement. It is the most important work I have done. Who would have imagined that for a girl from Utah?!

Ma ka 'olelo ke ola, ma ka 'olelo ka make is a saying which translates as "In language lies life, in language lies death". Language is the path towards understanding how the ancestors lived and thought about the world. If we lose the language, we lose their insight into the Hawaiian way of life, including man's relationship to others, to the natural world and to the spiritual world. It is not a world view we can afford to lose.

My purpose in writing to you is to encourage you to continue to pass on the Scots Gaelic language to your children. Share your dreams and come together to overcome whatever obstacles are there. You and your visions are mightier than outside forces, and your language and culture deserve to survive! I lend my support from across the seas for your success and indeed a flourishing of the language and culture that form the essence of the land and people of Scotland.

If you’d like more information on the history and development of the Hawaiian language, go to www.archaeolink.com/linguistics_hawaiian_language. The author can be contacted on amyj@hawaii.edu