Students to honor Kalaupapa patients

By MEGAN MOSELEY Tribune-Herald staff writer

June 2, 2014 - 7:27pm

It’s a disease that took almost 8,000 lives.

The history of Hansen’s disease, more commonly referred to as leprosy, is intertwined with Hawaiian history.

In 1866, King Kamehameha V banished all Hawaiians suffering from Hansen’s disease to the Kalaupapa peninsula on Molokai where they could live out their last days and were blocked off from the rest of the world.

June 30 marks the 45th anniversary of the end of the isolation law, and a Hilo-based nonprofit is making it their mission to place a lei at every known burial site at Kalaupapa in remembrance of former outcast patients.

According to Kerri A. Inglis, a history professor at the University of Hawaii at Hilo, it’s Hui Malama Makanalua’s goal to both honor and respect those who lived there and to raise awareness about the disease while quelling any negative social stigma associated with it.

Hansen’s disease is a chronic infection caused by certain types of bacteria. The bacteria was discovered by Norwegian scientist G.H. Armauer Hansen in the 1800s. Inglis said there was strong evidence and understanding of the bacteria early on, and by the 1950s, effective treatments were available.

However, people were still skeptical about whether or not the disease was contagious.

“(It) took a long time for the public to accept it’s not highly contagious and that people didn’t need to be quarantined the way they were,” Inglis said.

Raising awareness is one reason that Inglis continues to bring students at the university to the island, and it was during a visit to Kalaupapa in November that the idea for the project, “Lei Hali’a O Kalaupapa,” surfaced.

“Last November, we took a few lei to the cemetery. Students got to choose who to put the lei for,” she explained. “Some have family; it’s personal. Some would choose whoever they felt inspired by. But we felt it wasn’t enough.”

There are approximately 1,200 marked graves, along with several unmarked burial sites in the area. Inglis said she and the students decided everyone should be remembered and that every grave site should have a lei.

“A student planted the seed for the idea, and it blossomed from that,” she said.

Inglis said the visits are often emotional.

“When we get there, it’s a mix of the awe of the beauty of the place, the amazing geography, and mix with the heaviness of the history,” she said. “So we spend time there and give service to the community and aina to feel apart of it, and connect to that history and understand it more deeply.”

Drew Kapp said he visited a couple years ago. Kapp, a geography professor at UH-Hilo and member of Hui Malama Makanalua, described it as a “profound experience.”

Fellow Hui member Noah Gomes said the feeling of the place is slightly indescribable.

“You definitely feel the mana there. You feel the power, and at the same time there’s this feeling of immense sadness of the place and it’s a reminder of what happened there,” he said.