The Life & Legacy of Aunty Edith Kanaka'ole

Her Life

Born Edith Kekuhikuhiipu‘uoneonaali‘iokohala Kenao on October 30th, 1913 in Honomū, Hawai'i to parents John Kanaeleolualaka`ikenao (1870) and Mary Kekuewa Ahiena (1880).

Hula had roots in her early life. Her interests in both Hula and music were clear from a young age and driven by her parent’s endeavors.

While she did not finish intermediate school, when asked about her schooling she joked that she stopped at "seventh grade and a half".

She was among the first Hawaiian homesteaders to move to Keaukaha, which was established in 1924.

She met and married her husband Luka Kanaka‘ole in 1933. The couple had six children together.

Kanaka‘ole founded her own hālau (hula school) named Hālau o Kekuhi in 1953.

In 1950, she toured the United States, Canada, and Asia with a hula group named for her daughter Nālani.

Professor at the Hawai‘i Community College from 1971 to 1979 and the University of Hawai‘i at Hilo from 1973 to 1979, her courses and seminars were on a variety of topics: Hawaiian chants and myths, genealogy, Polynesian history, land ownership, and ethnobotany.

State Association of Hawaiian Civic Clubs named her "Hawaiian of the Year" in 1977.

Kanaka‘ole represented Hawai‘i at the Second South Pacific Festival of the Arts in Rotorua, New Zealand in 1976.

Kanaka‘ole was diagnosed with cancer and passed away at the age of 65 on October 3rd, 1979.

Her Legacy

Governor of Hawai'i, George Ariyoshi, awarded Kanaka'ole with the 1979 Distinction of Cultural Leadership award in recognition of her commitment to her community.

Her second and final album entitled "Hi'ipoi I Ka 'Āina Aloha" or "Cherish the Beloved Land" was released posthumously. In 1979, the album won "Best Traditional Album" in the Nā Hōkū Hanohano Awards.

Edith Kanaka'ole Hall at UH Hilo was dedicated to "Aunty" Edith in 1984.

One of Kanaka'ole's prominent endeavors was her assistance with the Imua Project. which is a joint faculty-student enterprise of multiple University of Hawai'i Community College campuses in affiliation with Hawai'i Space Grant Consortium.

Edith Kanaka'ole Foundation (EFK) was established in 1990 to further promote her teachings of the Hawaiian worldview.

Hālau o Kekuhi and its teachers are deemed as "Living Hawaiian Treasures" by OHA in recognition of the depth of native Hawaiian traditional culture that the halau carries forward in 1996.

Edith Kanaka'ole Stadium hosts the Merrie Monarch Fesitval in Hilo every year.

A new mural is painted on Edith Kanaka'ole Hall in honor of Kanaka'ole and her legacy and Mookini Library's Hawaiian Collection is renamed and dedicated as "Edith Kanaka'ole Hawaiian Collection".

Hālau o Kekuhi continues to operate as the cultural center for the EFK with a focus on mastery of the 'aiha'a hula style and oli. Leadership has passed matrilineally to her daughters, Pualani Kanaka'ole Kanahele and Nālani Kanaka'ole. Pualani's role as kumu hula was passed on to her daughters, Kekuhi Keali'ikanaka'oleohaililani and Huihui Kanahele-Mossman. The halau is currently lead by Nālani and Huihui.

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