

# MEDICAL SCHOOL HOTLINE

## Mala La'au Lapa'au – John A. Burns School of Medicine's Hawaiian Healing Garden

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*In 1993, the Medical School Hotline was founded by Satoru Izutsu PhD (former vice-dean UH JABSOM), it is a monthly column from the University of Hawai'i John A. Burns School of Medicine and is edited by Kathleen Kihmm Connolly PhD; HJMPH Contributing Editor.*

Within the campus of the University of Hawai'i's John A. Burns School of Medicine (UH-JABSOM) and the UH Cancer Center stands the vibrant *Mala La'au Lapa'au* (a garden of Hawaiian healing plants). The Mala La'au Lapa'au (Mala) is affectionately named *Ka'ohinani*, meaning “gathering beauty” after the Nu'uaniu residence of the late *hulu kupuna* (beloved elder) and JABSOM Professor Emeritus, Dr. Kekuni Blaisdell. *Ka'ohinani* is a living outdoor classroom providing opportunities for JABSOM faculty, staff, and students, community members, and visiting guests to gather in learning Hawaiian ancestral knowledge and practices of traditional healing and well-being. The medical school's Department of Native Hawaiian Health (DNHH) served as the driving force establishing the Mala in 2005 and continues to take the lead as innovative *kahu* or stewards of the garden.

### The University of Hawai'i's Commitment to a Hawaiian Sense of Place

Catalyzed by University of Hawai'i (UH) Native Hawaiian Task Force Reports since the mid-1980's, creating “a Hawaiian sense of place” is a directive stipulated in UH Systems, UH Manoa (UHM) and JABSOM strategic planning documents and policies.<sup>1-9</sup> For example, UHM's 2002-2010 strategic plan contains the imperative to, “create a Hawaiian sense of place on campus through improved landscaping, architectural design, signage, and the creation of gathering spaces.” UHM's 2010-2015 strategic plan re-articulates this same imperative adding, “and recommit to sustainability in facilities management and infrastructure development.” The UH Systems affirmed broader commitments in their 2015-2021 strategic plans, aspiring to be “the world's foremost indigenous serving university” and imparting a Hawaiian sense of place on all campuses through the creation of *pu'uhonua* (place of peace and inclusivity). Moreover, UH Board of Regents Policy 4.201 Sec. C, No. 7 provides that, “the (UH) president, working with the chancellors, ensures the unique commitment to Native Hawaiians is fulfilled by: encouraging Native Hawaiians to practice their language, culture, and other aspects of their traditional customary rights throughout all university campuses and providing Hawaiian environments and facilities for such activities.”

Similar language has been incorporated into JABSOM's internal strategic planning documents, which assert, “The Hawaiian Sense of Place is a part of the essence of JABSOM” and “JABSOM embraces the concept of a Hawaiian-led place of learning.” JABSOM's commitment to a Hawaiian sense of place is demonstrated through its leadership, administration, and faculty efforts to embrace Hawaiian values and practices. As a key leader in this endeavor, the DNHH has continued to provide guidance and direction towards meaningful implementation of these plans and policies.

### A Hawaiian Sense of Place at JABSOM

When the original architectural plans were drawn up for what would become JABSOM's new campus in *Ka'akaukukui* (Kaka'ako is a misnomer used for the Ka'akaukukui area), architects consulted cultural practitioner and Kumu Hula, Frank Kawaikapuokalani Hewitt for guidance in incorporating aspects of Hawaiian culture. Elements of nature such as water, air, and earth as well as Hawaiian healing plants were incorporated into the campus design. Specifically, JABSOM chose four healing plants to be a part of its official logo: *kukui*, *popolo*, *'awa*, and *'ohi'a lehua*. *Kukui* symbolizes enlightenment and specific parts were used medicinally to treat sores, childhood ailments and rebuild strength after an illness.<sup>10,11</sup> *Popolo* is known to be foundational in Hawaiian medicine with specific parts used to treat respiratory ailments, skin eruptions, eye infections, and sore throats.<sup>11</sup> *'Awa* serves an important role in ceremonies with specific parts, usually the root, chewed and or mixed with liquids. Medically *'awa* was used for the treatment of insomnia, muscle strains, kidney disorders, and headaches.<sup>10</sup> *'Ohi'a Lehua* symbolizes regeneration as it is one of the first plants to appear after lava consumes and cleanses an area. Medically, *'ohi'a lehua* flowers were combined with other medicinal plants to alleviate childbirth pains.<sup>12</sup> In addition to JABSOM's plant logo, a band of traditional Native Hawaiian *kapa* designs encircles the third floor of campus buildings. Incorporated within this band is the depiction of the double helix of DNA, representing the importance of utilizing both modern and traditional ways of knowing when addressing health and wellness.

A committee formed on behalf of the former Office of Native Hawaiian Health (now known as the Department of Native Hawaiian Health) presented a culturally responsive and progressive proposal to the landscape architects. Committee members included the late Richard Paglinawan, noted cultural practitioner, the late Isabella Abbott, Professor Emeritus of botany at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa, and faculty members Drs. Benjamin Young, Martina Kamaka, and Nanette Judd. The group requested that all of the landscaping of the new campus represent a "Hawaiian sense of place." The group proposed native plantings that could withstand the harsh coastal environment surrounding the medical school. As part of the committee's proposal, the original smaller Hawaiian plant garden transformed into a larger garden dedicated to Native Hawaiian healing plants or *la'au lapa'au* (Mala La'au Lapa'au). Particular attention was paid to balancing the elements of the structural buildings with the elements in the garden. The influence of healing deities such as *Lono*, *Ku*, and *Hina* were particularly important when choosing the plants that were to be included.

After further negotiations, the landscaping plan was adapted to accommodate these requests. Native and Polynesian introduced trees and plants were to be planted throughout the central JABSOM campus and the Mala was established in the northwest corner of JABSOM's central courtyard. The outer campus landscape would have to retain the original design from the landowners, Hawai'i Community Development Authority.

### Present Use of the Mala

The Mala is increasingly serving as an opportunity for educational activities, service learning, and special events. It is currently used by JABSOM as part of its medical student educational curricula. Teaching occurs throughout the academic year. Faculty and students can be found at various times, planting, harvesting, or making traditional medicine in the Mala. The Mala has also become important for ceremonial uses. Graduation, *Kihei* and *'awa* ceremonies, memorial services, and formal welcomes have all been held within or adjacent to the Mala. In 2017, a special memorial event in the Mala celebrated the life of the late Judge James Burns and his many supportive contributions to JABSOM. In his honor, the Burns' immediate family concluded the event by planting a native lapa tree, used in traditional healing and symbolically representing enlightenment.

The influence of the Mala can be seen in relationship to visitors of the campus. Indigenous faculty from the University of Manitoba were inspired to start their own "mala" after spending time in the JABSOM Mala. A guided tour of the Mala has also become a requested highlight during formal tours of the medical school. During student recruitment fairs and visits, hundreds of high school and middle school students have come to visit the Mala as part of their tours of the JABSOM campus; students learn about traditional healing methods and the historical basis of Hawaiian culture as related to healing. To increase awareness and expand knowledge of *la'au lapa'au* for all, The Native Hawaiian Center of Excellence (NHCOE) has published a mala directory that is currently used as a reference

tool for teachers and students to identify and learn more about the garden's plants.<sup>13</sup>

As the main caretaker of the garden, the DNHH has a network of students and faculty who are invited to join monthly service days. This enables the department to control the access to the Mala as well as to restrict the use of chemicals and fertilizers on the healing plants. Concerned with Ka'akaukui's historical use as a landfill site, DNHH sent plant and soil samples from the Mala to State of Hawai'i Department of Health Laboratory Emergency Response Program and University of Hawai'i Agricultural Diagnostic Service Center for toxicology testing in 2014. Results showed no detectable levels of mercury in plant samples and other heavy metal levels in soil samples did not exceed known safety thresholds.

### Evolving & Proposed Future Expansion

In 2015, an ad hoc group of DNHH faculty, staff, and students was formed to further advance the Hawaiian sense of place policies at JABSOM. This group became known as Hui Ke Ao 'Oiwī (HKAO). Ke Ao 'Oiwī (creating culturally nurturing space to thrive) is one of four guiding principles used in the DNHH's strategic planning towards establishing a healthy and vibrant Native Hawaiian population. HKAO asserts the creation, maintenance, and enhancement of a Hawaiian sense of place at JABSOM supports greater recruitment, retention, and success for Native Hawaiian students, staff, faculty, and administrators. In early 2016, HKAO conducted a needs assessment survey about the Mala La'au Lapa'au with DNHH faculty, staff, and students. By April 2016, based on assessment findings, JABSOM's Dean Jerris Hedges signed a memorandum acknowledging DNHH's collaborative efforts with JABSOM and Cancer Research Center Facilities Management and Grounds to "expand Mala La'au Lapa'au planting and use sites within the internal landscape of the JABSOM campus." The memorandum outlined several key activities including:

- expanding garden planting areas
- increasing cultural and healing plant inventory —particularly *kalo* (taro) and *'awa* (kawa)
- creating a more prominent cultural *kipuka* (metaphorically, a place of calm and peace), or *pu'uhonua*, and central gathering place for Hawaiian and other indigenous students
- developing further a tribute to Hawaiian ancestral knowledge of health and healing

In accountability to assessment findings and the memorandum, HKAO was provided with DNHH funding from 2016-2017 to conceptualize the physical JABSOM interior campus courtyard as a 21st century Hawaiian place of learning for all. To reach this end, HKAO consulted architects, Native Hawaiian scholars, cultural practitioners, and businesses to inform the development of a landscape re-design plan emanating around a contemporary *halau* (an instructional meeting house) placed at the *piko* ("navel" or center) of the campus.

A design concept plan known as Halau Ola o Ka'akaukui was produced. The plan enhances the original Mala La'au Lapa'au by adding more learning stations, cultural plants, and appropriate gathering areas. Two adjacent lawns would be converted into separately themed health gardens related to traditional Hawaiian nutrition known as the Mala 'Ai and present la'au lapa'au practices that appropriate non-native medicinal plants known as the Mala La'au Kahiki. The contemporary halau would be structured circularly with thatching incorporated into the interior ceiling. At the structure's zenith would be an oculus representing a physical piko or connection between *Wakea* (sky father) and *Papa* (earth mother). Artistic mediums depicting Hawaiian historical figures, *na mo'olelo* (stories), and values related to health and healing will be embodied throughout the hālau. Examples include the story of Lonopuha – the origin of the art of healing in Hawai'i, Matthew Puakahakoilanimanua Makalua – first Native Hawaiian to become a western-trained physician, and the *Kumulipo*, a Hawaiian cosmogonic chant. Pa'akai or salt, used in purification ceremonies, food, and medicine will be made in *kahekaheka* or artificial salt pans adjacent to the halau. Salt pans were once a natural and prolific feature along the original Ka'akaukui coastline (near to Ala Moana Boulevard). Connecting the Halau and Mala La'au Lapa'au is an elevated grass platform intended for ceremonies and performances.

In the fall of 2017, the design concept plan obtained support from DNHH Chair —Dr. Keawe'aimoku Kaholokula, UHM Native Hawaiian Affairs Programs Officer—Dr. Kaiwipuni Lipe, the Association of Hawaiian Civic Clubs during their 58th annual convention, and JABSOM Dean Jerris Hedges. Moving forward, HKAO is now actively seeking funding and partnerships to make the design concept a reality. From this endeavor, DNHH hopes to build a legacy that honors our kupuna

(elders) who have placed us in our roles to fulfill our kuleana (responsibility) to support seven-generations of healers into the future. Halau Ola o Ka'akaukui is the next living iteration of the Mala La'au Lapa'au's ability to “gather beauty” upon the foundations of our ancestors. To *ho'i hou i ka piko* (return to the source) is to *ho'i hou i ka mauili ola* (return to health and well-being). We hope many will join us on this transformative journey.

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