

Kūpono





Heritage Society Luncheon

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Aloha,

As we reflect on the UH Foundation’s mission, one truth stands out: philanthropy doesn’t happen by accident. It is deliberate, intentional work, and we are increasingly seeing what that vision makes possible.

Inside this issue of Kūpono, you’ll see what intentional giving looks like in action. We are honored to share stories of work that is making a difference across our islands, including:

The Hale Pāpa’i Initiative at UH Maui College: a program started after community pleas for help due to the West Maui wildfires.

The ‘Ēlama and Hilo One Scholarships on Hawai’i Island: vital programs that break down financial and social barriers, allowing local residents to attend Hawai’i Community College and transforming their futures right in their own backyard.

We view our work as a profound privilege. Beyond managing financial resources, we are stewards of trust and hope. You are funding groundbreaking research, creating accessible pathways to education and directly addressing Hawai’i’s workforce needs.

Thank you for your trust, your generosity and your unwavering commitment to our students and our state.

Tim Dolan

UH Foundation CEO and
UH VP of Advancement





Meeting Them Where They Are

How the Ēlama Scholarship is a lifeline for students

by Simplicio Paragas

When Hawai'i Community College student Blake Pena-Perez wakes up each morning, it isn't in a dorm room or an apartment in Pālanui. It is in the back of his 2009 Toyota Sienna van.

"I grew up in foster homes, surrounded by drugs, alcohol and chaos," said Pena-Perez, a first-generation freshman and recipient of the Ēlama and Hilo One (pronounced O-nay) scholarships. "There were times I didn't think I'd make it out. But I always believed education could be my way forward."

For Pena-Perez and many UH students, the path to higher education is a delicate balance between ambition and survival. A recent system-wide UH study exposed the realities of student basic needs insecurity, showing that a widespread number of students grapple with food shortages and unstable housing, with many forced to skip medical care to make ends meet.

"There were days I didn't know what I'd eat," Pena-Perez recalled. "That kind of stress takes over your

whole life. The Ēlama scholarship reminded me that there are people out there who truly care about students like me."

Beyond Statistics: Faces of Resilience

At Hawai'i CC's Pālanui campus, donor support is helping students rise above these challenges.

Ēlama & Hilo One Program participants benefited from the Kirk-Landry Charitable Fund, which covers tuition, wraparound support and mentoring.

“We’ve reached a record 83 students in the Ēlama program this year, with 55 directly supported by The Kirk-Landry Charitable Fund,” said Kalei Haleamau-Kam, director at Hawai‘i CC–Pāalamanui. “This support is changing lives and it’s giving students the chance to pursue higher education when, for many, it once felt out of reach.”

Charlee Rowe, a 32-year-old first-year student, knows this reality well. After high school, she worked on a production line but knew it wasn’t where she wanted to stay. When her late father, Raymond “Lana” Rowe, a retired Hawai‘i Battalion Chief, was diagnosed with lung cancer, she took on the role of caregiver – a life-changing experience that inspired her to pursue healthcare.

“Watching my dad go through his illness showed me how important compassionate care is,” Rowe said. “It gave me a purpose beyond myself.”

Always cautious about college costs, Rowe postponed the decision to attend for more than a decade until she learned about the Ēlama Scholarship.

“Without the scholarship, I might have taken a class or two before giving up,” she said. “It’s given me stability and hope, and now I can truly see a future in nursing.”

Compassion in Action

“Gifts from donors help support the Ēlama and Hilo One programs,” said Ēlama counselor-in-charge Precious

Mae Atendido. “This semester alone, we’ve helped students who didn’t know where their next meal would be coming from.”

For Caroline Landry, every student deserves a chance at higher education. “You have children who don’t really have a roadmap for how to navigate college,” she said. “But if you can somehow make it possible and support them through just the first year of college, it can change everything. That’s why we call it the 13th year of high school, which is the Ēlama program. It involves wraparound support, mentoring and peer mentoring.”

The impact of achieving an AA degree is significant. According to a 2023-2024 UH Economic Research Organization study by Timothy Halliday and Rachel Inafuku, lifetime earnings for AS and AAS degree holders are 22% higher than earnings for those who leave the program without a degree.

“A donor can hear my thanks and see my smile,” said Perez-Pena, “but the meaningfulness of their gift goes a lot deeper than words and facial expressions. It has changed the trajectory of my entire life. I plan to get my associate degree and then continue my education – maybe even get my PhD.”

Landry points out that for many students, it’s not just a single obstacle but a series of challenges that stand in the way of attending college. “So, if you remove the barriers for these students to go through the first year of college,” she said, “chances are there will be second, third and fourth years.”



Charlee Rowe with her late dad Raymond “Lana” Rowe, who was awarded the Daniel R. Sayre Memorial Foundation Award for his work as a Battalion Chief at Waiākea Fire Station.

Currier Empowerment Scholarship supports Hawai'i Island students

by Simplicio Paragas

Jeff and Katie Currier first found harmony through music. As members of the same band in Flint, Michigan, they learned early what it meant to collaborate and to build something together. That shared rhythm carried them forward through family and careers shaped by blue-collar roots. It would later guide their commitment to giving back.

"We don't forget where we came from," Jeff says. "That informs every decision we make."

This includes the decision to establish the Jeff and Kathryn Currier Empowerment Scholarship, which will support Hawai'i Community College students pursuing a degree in nursing, auto body repair and painting, automotive mechanics technology, carpentry, diesel mechanics, and electrical installation and maintenance technology.

Both raised in households tied to Michigan's manufacturing economy, the Curriers grew up with a clear understanding of hard work. Those early lessons stayed with them as they built their lives together, moving from the Midwest to the Pacific Northwest in pursuit of opportunity, raising a family and navigating the balance between creativity and practicality that defined their early years.



Above: Jeff and Katie Currier with their daughters, from left, Caroline and Libby, and son Josh.

A legacy grounded in responsibility

"Our philanthropy comes from a strong sense of obligation to a community that has been so welcoming to us," Jeff says. "We know what it means to grow up in a working-class family and the struggles that come with it."

The Curriers made a deliberate choice to support trade-based education, healthcare training and

community college programs, fields that lead to durable careers, as well as serve essential needs across Hawai'i.

For the Curriers, philanthropy is not transactional; it is relational. It is rooted in empathy, and a belief that success carries responsibility.

"Our past informs who we are today," Katie says. "That perspective keeps us grounded and reminds us why this matters."



Hale Pāpa‘i

Tiny structures deliver mighty impact.

by Simplicio Paragas

When the Lahaina wildfires tore through West Maui, Michael Young lost his home, as did his two sisters. In the days that followed, the calls began. Friends, neighbors and community members reached out, asking how they could learn the basic skills to repair what remained. With generous support from the Hawai‘i

Community Foundation’s Maui Strong Fund and other donors, UH Maui College was able to step in and help the community in many ways including providing the training so urgently needed.

“I grew up in Lahaina and saw how many homes were lost or badly damaged,” said Young, Apprenticeship and Trades Coordinator at UH Maui College. “People wanted to know if there were programs that taught carpentry, framing, roofing, painting – anything that would help them start restoring their homes.”

A small shelter takes shape at UH Maui College

Meaning small shelter, Hale Pāpa‘i emerged from that urgent need. Based at UH Maui College, the hands-on construction initiative brings together – for the first time – credit courses, union apprenticeships and free non-credit community classes to help Lahaina residents recover while learning practical building skills.

“What’s happened with Hale Pāpa‘i is that construction

classes across the college have been able to apply their curriculum in a real way,” said Laura Nagle, Interim Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs. “Students are learning by doing, while contributing to something that directly serves the community.”

Portable sheds with lasting lessons

The program’s first focus was immediate and essential: storage. Families displaced by the fires often



had nowhere to securely keep tools, belongings or keepsakes while long-term rebuilding remained uncertain. “This is a way for people to feel safe and regain a sense of stability,” said Moani Whittle-Wagner, an academic support specialist who named the project and helped guide its launch.

To avoid construction permitting, Young proposed building 8-by-10-foot portable sheds – small enough to move, yet large enough to meet real needs. Built on campus and delivered directly to landowners, the sheds double as teaching tools for framing, roofing, painting and flooring. Each one is constructed by local hands, reinforcing a sense of shared effort and connection.

Skills that rebuild more than structures

For Gene Castillo, Hale Pāpa’i offered both skills and hope. His family lost multiple homes in the fire. Evacuating with his then-six-months-pregnant wife and young daughter Azel, he recalled watching his neighborhood burn.

“Without her,” he said, gesturing toward his now two-year-old daughter Zanel, “I think we would have been lost. She gave us something to look forward to.”

The impact is tangible. To date, 63 sheds have been delivered, with 255 households on a waiting list. Some serve as temporary bedrooms; others store rebuilding supplies.

“Drivers are often greeted with hugs and tears,” Whittle-Wagner said. “They’re small structures, but the relief is real.”

As immediate needs are met, Hale Pāpa’i also lays the groundwork for long-term rebuilding, opening pathways into various trades. According to Nagle, participants move between non-credit and credit programs, with many transitioning into apprenticeships

and construction careers. A six-week pre-apprenticeship program with the Carpenters Union reports a 100% placement rate, while free weekly classes continue to draw learners from high school students to kūpuna.

“Several philanthropic groups have been crucial for funding the Hale Pāpa’i,” said Nagle, “but future support will be needed to meet continued demand.”

For Whittle-Wagner, the project’s meaning extends beyond its physical form. “These sheds are more than wood and nails,” she said. “They’re hope in a time of loss.”

Hale Pāpa’i demonstrates that recovery doesn’t wait for permits, budgets or formal plans. It begins when people are willing to learn, build and show up for one another – one shed and one skill at a time.



Students receive hands-on training when participating in the Hale Pāpa’i program.



Backyard Monkey is a TEAM Contributor

by Mitchell K. Dwyer

“The TEAM program changed the way I see the island,” says Justin Barrios. “It taught me how to care for the place that raised me – and I want students coming up behind me to have the same opportunity.”

Hawai'i Island's forests reshape people. They shape careers, too. Barrios, owner of the Hilo-based land care and tree services company Backyard Monkey, says Hawai'i Community College's Tropical Forest Ecosystem and Agroforestry Management (TEAM) program offered new skills and a way to contribute to

his community. His recent donation to establish the TEAM Program Fund honors this experience and strengthens the pathway for future students.

Rooted in the program that shaped him

Barrios took several classes in the TEAM program while launching Backyard Monkey, and the experience stayed with him. He credits Program Director Orlo Steele, his instructor and now longtime collaborator, with helping

him to understand the deeper work of forest stewardship.

“When students come through our program, they learn how to identify native plants and use geographic information systems,” Steele says, “but they're also learning how to take care of Hawai'i Island's resources in ways that honor the place and the people who live here.”

Justin's gift to the program highlights its wider story: local students, trained by invested faculty, moving into careers supporting Hawai'i Island's ecosystems and communities.

Strengthening Hawai'i Island's workforce

The need for skilled forestry and conservation technicians continues to grow across the state, especially on Hawai'i Island, where agencies and land management organizations consistently struggle to fill positions. Steele says, “There's a very high demand. They cannot fill all the positions coming up, and many positions are filled by people coming to Hawai'i from outside the state, but our students, who come from all over Hawai'i, know these islands and know the resources.”

Graduates of the TEAM program enter roles with the Department of Land and Natural Resources, the National Park Service, The Nature Conservancy, watershed partnerships, and private land care companies.

Above: Justin Barrios

With demand high and recruitment competitive, accessibility is essential. As the island's open-admissions, affordable community college, Hawai'i CC prepares people for careers tied to the island itself, using a curriculum grounded in local ecosystems, local culture, and local needs. Many students arrive already connected to the land through family traditions and recreational activity, and the program gives them a clear route to meaningful work at home.

Supporting students – and the program's future

Barrios's gift supports TEAM students through curriculum development, field-based learning, greenhouse and nursery materials, equipment upgrades, travel for fieldwork, and summer internship stipends. These resources will help students complete their training with confidence and momentum.

“

This gift allows students to finish strong without having to choose between school and a paycheck.”

**–Orlo Steele, TEAM Program Director,
Hawai'i Community College**

Steele says student support during internships is especially meaningful. The program requires a summer field internship, and while some partner organizations offer paid placements, many do not. “It's hard to ask students to commit to full time fieldwork without some kind of financial help,” Steele says. “This gift allows students to finish strong without having to choose between school and a paycheck.”

Barrios sees the gift as an investment in the island's future, built on knowledge cultivated by the TEAM program. Backyard Monkey's success is rooted in the training he received, and he hopes the fund will help the next generation enter the field ready to contribute.

“If you want a career that keeps your brain sharp, your body strong, and your work meaningful, arboriculture delivers,” Barrios says, “so love what you do and never stop educating yourself.”

Students in Hawai'i CC's TEAM program learn to manage native forest ecosystems, grow native plants, and establish agroforestry operations.



Future Telehealth for the Ocean: ‘Reef Halos’ enable global checkups

by Simplicio Paragas

Overview of the reef halos at Lady Musgrave Island, Australia



imagery and Google Earth, Madin realized these halos weren’t isolated – they appeared across coral ecosystems worldwide.

From thousands of feet above the ocean, coral reefs reveal a hidden signal: pale, circular “halos” etched into the seafloor.

For Elizabeth Madin, an associate research professor at the Hawai‘i Institute of Marine Biology within UH Mānoa’s School of Ocean and Earth Science and Technology, those rings may hold the key to monitoring reef health across the planet, without ever getting in the water.

For decades, marine biologists have relied on scuba diving and snorkeling to assess coral ecosystems.

While these approaches remain essential, they can only reach a fraction of the world’s reefs.

“Normally we would go in and survey the fish and the corals underwater, and that is important, and still totally relevant,” Madin said. “But we cannot get to most reefs that way.”

A Serendipitous Discovery in Australia

The breakthrough was sparked from a moment of curiosity.

Years ago, while stationed at Heron Island on Australia’s Great Barrier Reef, Madin and her scientist husband, Joshua Madin, were sidelined by severe weather that made boat travel impossible. With fieldwork on hold, she turned her attention to the unusual, faint rings she had previously noticed surrounding coral patches.

“I thought, well, we can’t do anything else,” Madin recalled. “So let’s just go wander out to the reef and see what these halos look like underwater.”

What began as a workaround quickly became the beginning of a 14-year research project. Later, viewing reefs through satellite

What the Halos Reveal

These circular halos are not shaped by currents or tides, though water temperature and nutrients in the seawater do play a part. They are created primarily by behavior. Small, plant-eating fish graze on algae surrounding coral reefs but rarely stray far from shelter, where predators can easily reach them. Their caution creates a distinct boundary, a ring cleared of vegetation marking the limit of how far they are willing to venture.

If predator populations decline – often due to overfishing – that boundary can disappear. Emboldened, grazing fish roam farther, and the halo fades.

“If you see halos in a place, it is telling you a couple of things,” Madin explained. “It is telling you that you have enough herbivores and probably also telling you that there are enough predators.”

In other words, the presence or absence of these rings offers a visible signal of ecosystem balance.

From Observation to Global Tool

Recognizing the potential of utilizing these halos as a global monitoring tool, the Paul M. Angell Family Foundation stepped in to fund Madin's innovative work. An initial grant expanded into a multi-year commitment. Recently, the foundation asked Madin what it would take to turn her research into an impactful tool in the real world, resulting in a substantial two-year grant.

Backed by this vital funding, Madin's dedicated team has already developed a beta version of the software. The platform uses artificial intelligence to scan satellite imagery, automatically detecting if halos are present, determining their locations and measuring their sizes.

By pairing satellite imagery with the instinctive behavior of reef fish, her work offers scientists a long-needed way to take the pulse of coral reefs at a global scale.

In an era when many reefs are under increasing pressure, these halos – visible from space – may serve as an early warning system, helping protect the ecosystems that sustain life below the surface.

"Ultimately, our goal is to grow this into a much larger, independent center," said Madin, referring to the new Marine Conservation Innovation Group, a merger of her lab and that of her husband, Joshua. "By scaling our work, we can leverage donor partnership to drive conservation solutions with global reach."

UH Giving Day 2026 Unites Community to Raise \$1.36M



On April 8, 2026, the University of Hawai'i community came together for UH Giving Day – a 24-hour celebration of generosity. Alumni, friends, faculty, staff, students, and community members answered the call to give, demonstrating the strength and shared purpose of the UH 'ohana.

Mahalo to our donors who directed their gifts to urgent student relief, Kona low flood relief, research, athletics and a wide range of impactful UH programs statewide.



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A Big Brother's Lasting Gift by Simplicio Paragas

Lisa Nomura describes her brother, the late Dr. Steven Nomura, as the “quintessential big brother,” who was steady, caring and guided by an unwavering sense of responsibility to family, friends and the countless patients whose lives he touched.

“He was very special to me,” Lisa said. “Even though there was an eight-year age gap, we were incredibly close. He always gave me advice ... even if I didn’t always follow it,” she added with a small, knowing smile.

Steve’s journey was as eclectic as it was remarkable. He spent his elementary and high school years in Okinawa before heading to University of Washington in Seattle.

From there, he followed his intellectual curiosity to UH Mānoa to earn a master’s degree in genetics.

When it came time to choose between medical or dental school, Steve carefully weighed his options. Lisa remembers their parents teasing him that he was “getting old” – 33 at the time – and re-



mindful of him that medical school might take longer than he wanted. His father also cautioned him about the rigors of emergency calls and late-night shifts. In the end, dentistry won out.

Steve built a thriving dental practice in Aberdeen, Washington, and in true big-brother fashion, he brought his younger brother Glen along, even though Glen was already an architect with a firm in Seattle.

A Quiet Giver, an Enduring Legacy

Throughout his life, Steve quietly supported students in their academic pursuits, offering his time and his financial resources to help them succeed.

When he passed away after a five-year

battle with prostate cancer in 2023, the loss reverberated deeply.

Steve’s lifelong instinct to care for others didn’t end with his passing. The same generosity that shaped his relationships and his career now guides the charitable impact he leaves behind.

Through a generous gift from his estate, he continues to support the education he so deeply valued, funding a professorship within the Department of Cell and Molecular Biology at the John A. Burns School of Medicine.

The endowed professorship will strengthen teaching and research in genetics, allowing researchers to harness genetic insights that can lead to earlier discoveries, targeted treatments and better health outcomes for Hawai'i’s communities.

For Lisa, the gift represents everything her brother stood for: compassion, service and a belief in lifting others up. “He had a big heart,” she said. “He spent his life helping people. And now, even after he’s gone, he’s still doing that.”