

Kaua`i Habitat for Humanity

Interview

Interviewer: Sasha Lee, The Hanapepe Hero

Interviewee: Milani Pimental, Kaua`i Habitat for Humanity

Company Background:

Kaua`i Habitat for Humanity provides opportunities for hardworking families in need on Kaua`i to build and buy their own home using its established self-help model. Kauai Habitat builds homes which are sold to qualified homebuyers at no profit through affordable mortgages. Through the Habitat program, homebuyers acquire the knowledge and tools to be successful, long-term homeowners and members of the community.

Kaua`i Habitat for Humanity also operates ReStore®, which sells new and used discounted building and construction materials, home improvement items, gently used furniture, appliances, and household goods to raise money for the affiliate. Proceeds from ReStore® support Kaua`i Habitat for Humanity's mission to build safe, decent, and affordable housing.

Sasha: Could you give a brief overview of your work?

Milani: So across the nation, we have over 1,000 independently run 501(c)(3) Habitat for Humanity affiliates. We are an independently run nonprofit organization as Kaua`i Habitat for Humanity. We are part of the network of Habitat for Humanity International, so that allows us to operate using their established branding, resources like materials to promote our mission, and other staff resources to consult with as our projects take fruition. The work of Habitat, and especially ours here at Kaua`i Habitat for Humanity, is to bring people together to build homes and hope.

Here on Kaua`i, most notably folks will recognize that we operate ReStore® and that is our resale shop for Habitat which allows us to resell new and used goods.

We divert them from the landfill, and then revenues generated go right back into our mission of home building. Another obvious portion of our work is our vertical construction we do with home building. And folks have seen us in various parts of the island, especially in recent years, in Ele Ele and on the West side, where we have 125 habitat homes that we've built.

We also operate as a developer. So just like some of the other large developers out there that you see doing subdivisions, Kaua'i Habitat in particular takes on land development where we can produce subdivisions to tackle the large need of affordable housing as much as possible. When I say that our mission is to bring people together, we staff about 25 people right now as full-time employees, and a large number of them are in our construction program.

And so we use paid supervisors and assistant supervisors that have technical experience in the construction process. They are overseen by a director of construction and planning. They bring unskilled and skilled people together to build the homes alongside our home buyers. So that's really the work of Habitat and how we keep our mission going on the island, really by having the inputs of various members of our community in addition to the home buyers.

Sasha: What inspired you to join Habitat for Humanity?

Milani: I have a little bit of a different story. I became involved with Habitat probably at age 18. When I was in college in Chicago, I was part of an organization and my role was to spearhead volunteer opportunities for our group. And that's when I encountered the work of Habitat for Humanity and really got acquainted with their work. It was exciting to me that community members could gather together and pound hammers and nails and install fixtures to help someone achieve their dream of home ownership affordably.

From there, I always had this kind of underlying knowledge that Habitat was out there. When I moved to Kaua'i in the late 90s, I hadn't realized there was any Habitat established here. It turns out it was very low-key at that time because they were just trying to get underway with permitting for the large subdivision that we just only completed last summer. So in 2001, when my husband and I became

homeowners ourselves, we participated in a home build through another affordable housing nonprofit on an island that was not Habitat.

But that's how then I became acquainted with the ongoing work of Habitat, even though it was more behind the scenes. So when you ask the question of what inspired me on this initiative, it is because I'm an affordable homeowner myself. I just think it's such a great thing to offer our community and give people an opportunity. Whereas they wouldn't necessarily, our low income community, be able to pick up the phone and call a realtor.

Sasha: What impact are you looking to make?

Milani: So here on Kaua`i, last year was our 30th year anniversary. If you're not aware, we were sort of born in the wake of Hurricane Iniki, when there was so much devastation island-wide. So that's how we got our start, primarily on the North Shore, on Anahola, up through the North Shore, our initial homes were built out there. The impact we're trying to make today is, you know, really using the Habitat model, bringing people together to build homes, similar to what you might find in great Midwest farming communities where people come together and do barn raisings.

It kind of stems from that. We want to continue to build on that, but the traditional way of Habitat was to raise funds, build a house and do it all over again, one by one by one. Because our need is so great, we need thousands of units yesterday. And that's just to accommodate our current needs. We're not even yet accommodating what our anticipated growth is based on what our county planners are projecting. The revision of our strategy over the last few years. really has been that we cannot make a difference unless we get into sort of the risky business of subdivision development to provide homes.

So we're looking at acquiring land and putting in infrastructure so that it'll be ready for home building. So the impact is more than one home at a time. It's a subdivision at a time, basically.

Sasha: What challenges have you faced?

Milani: Well, today the challenges are a lot more interesting. Prior to COVID, it would have been just keeping staffing up, making sure we can recruit enough volunteer labor to help keep costs low and keep to our timelines. Today, we face more of the same. For instance, if we have someone that does contract COVID while building with us, we've got to take some time to analyze how it's impacting our construction site and then sort of pivot. And we may see a couple days delay at that construction site due to that.

When it's behind the scenes and administration, we're dealing with some rising prices as part of our day-to-day challenges. Changing weather patterns are now becoming a big concern. In the first two months of the year, we've already had several rainouts in Waimea, which is normally where we send folks when the other parts of the island are raining.

Sasha: What energizes you about your community?

Milani: My family is from here and I see that this community is not only closely knit, but has such strong ties culturally to the land. I think what excites me about our work is being able to provide our own communities with an opportunity to remain here, you know, and really strengthen those ties to the land for future generations. Because that's how it should be; I think you shouldn't be forced out of your community for any reason, especially housing.

So we need to be able to give back and provide our own residents this opportunity to stay and really to flourish here. With safe, decent, affordable housing people will thrive even more so.

Sasha: Is there anything else you would like to add?

Milani: We're always looking for volunteers. We do require registration and an orientation prior to coming out to volunteer, but our ReStore® and construction sites are open to taking volunteers from Tuesday to Saturday on reservation basis. So people can contact us to volunteer at Kauaihabitat.org if they're interested. We'll get you connected with online sign up and start the process from there.

In addition, philanthropic contributions really do make a difference and go such a long way in our work here at Kaua`i Habitat or any other habitat, of course. And every dollar gets put to work and leaves a lasting impact for our families. So we certainly appreciate any of the support from volunteerism to donations and beyond.