

Hale Puna Interview

Interviewer: Sasha Lee, The Hanapepe Hero

Interviewee: Jim Ballantine, Hale Puna

Company Background: Hale Puna is a nonprofit organization that restores neglected historic sites and turns them into vibrant, sustainable tourist attractions that support local culture, local food production, local artisans, and local people seeking good jobs in rural West Kaua'i, specifically Waimea. Hale Puna has restored the Gulick-Rowell historic house and runs the Kōke'e Lodge.

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

Jim: Hale Puna was started, originally, as a way to restore the 200 year old house that's on our property. The house itself is amazing. It was built with the coral bricks that were harvested from the reef down in Waimea back in 1828, so it's definitely one of the oldest houses on Kaua'i. I just felt like somebody should be preserving it.

So we started a nonprofit in 2016 and at the same time decided, because the acre and a half land had been empty and there had been a farm there at one point, to restore it. And also, bring the idea of permaculture forests and food sustainability into the work that the nonprofit did. The mission statement for Hale Puna is about building both cultural and economic vitality on the West Side.

So we planted about a hundred trees, and now, eight years later, we have avocados, mangoes, breadfruit, soursop, rollinia, limes, lemons and all sorts of great produce. We have a farmer's market on the property that happens every Thursday.

In 2016, I was also asked to take over running the Kōke'e Lodge, which is the restaurant in the state park about 16 miles up the hill from Waimea, that has been a destination for families for over a hundred years to get away from the heat of the West Side.

Once we took over Kōke'e Lodge, there was a perfect opportunity there to do demonstrations about how to cook local food and how to find local food. In the intervening years, it's been really extraordinary to watch the growth of what's available on the island. This last weekend we did a six-course dinner that featured all of the local products, local fish, local beef, local lamb, and amazing vegetables that are now produced on the island.

So it's been really rewarding to see. The good thing that happened was that the lease for Kōke'e Lodge and the cabins was given to Hale Puna as a gift. So now, **Hale Puna derives income from the lodge, and every day at the end of the farmer's market whatever hasn't been sold to the public goes up to the lodge to become food for the rest of the week. So it embodies kind of the idea of a circular economy. And creating that kind of symbiotic dynamic.**

The other exciting thing is that in 2016, the payroll for Kōke'e Lodge was around \$200,000 a year and there were about six employees. Today, the payroll is about \$2 million a year. And all of that going to 24 people who live on the West Side derive income from that.

We think it's really exciting that we have that opportunity to feed and nourish the West Side. Covid was really tough of us in terms of our process. The historic commission shut down for two years and we were not able to get a building permit. So finally that is starting to loosen up and we just picked up our permit last week and we'll begin by restoring the cement in front of the building and then redoing the Lanai and then on and on with new projects. We received a huge grant from the state, through the Grant-in-aid program, of about \$400,000. So that is going to help us with this next phase.

Sasha: What inspired you to start Hale Puna?

Jim: You know, I was born and raised here. My mother was born here. My grandfather was born here. My family has been here for over a hundred years. So, I have a real investment in Hawai'i. I was part of a family company, and on the board of directors for about 10 years but eventually decided that it was not

commercial activity that was going to get me excited, but rather doing something for the community.

And I felt like the house itself was this symbol of how Kaua'i had been forgetting the West Side. The property was fallow for 12 years and there were two ladies who had lived there for over 80 years. And eventually, because of the house falling apart, they needed to move out. They've subsequently died but they brought a lot of wonderful life to the place with a lot of planting and things like that, the Ramp Sisters.

I had been working in animation and traveling all over the world. I was running an animation studio in Australia, in Sydney and we had just finished a film and my daughter had just finished at Oberlin College. And I thought it was a good opportunity for a change of my story.

I really had a desire to go home. Before I did that, I went on a hike in New Zealand for three weeks. And it was during a hike that this phrase of, "You've got to go back and fix that house" came into my head, and I have no idea where it came from, but I have to say it was divinely inspired, and so that's when I decided to go back. I purchased the property from the family company and donated it to the non profit so they could have a basis to work from.

In the intervening years, I realized, you know, I can't do this by myself. So we have a wonderful board of directors and I've recently gotten off the board. I'm an emeritus so that I can focus on more cultural activities. I like to direct plays and put on concerts.

We do an amazing old time music festival up at the Kōke'e Lodge. We do concerts and dinners, like I was saying. So, doing more performative things, less, of writing grants. It is, you know, this amazing group of people who are doing most of the heavy lifting these days. And people who are in the community really support what we're doing.

Sasha: What impact are you looking to make?

Jim: We never created a metric to measure our success by. But to me, it's really about the vitality of the West Side and I feel like the West Side is often forgotten. You know, now they've decided not to build a new dump, they're just going to make the Kekaha dump bigger, which is a really sad state of affairs, but one that we have no control over.

I just feel like having more housing, more families, and more opportunities is what I sort of measure it by, and also having more art, performance and music.

I'm sure that's something that the board should think about. They just recently completed a strategic planning and in the future, getting the house finished is important. But we're also looking at other opportunities like Kōke'e Lodge and other spaces around the West Side, particularly the Kekaha Mill that has been fallow for now three decades. So, we'd love to see more development along those lines.

Sasha: What energizes you about your community?

Jim: I mean, it's really about the underdog. You know, the guy who doesn't get anything is who we're trying to take care of. It's not that Hanalei doesn't have its own problems with horrible gentrification and everything is so expensive and people being priced out of housing.

In the South Side there's 400 acres that the family company sold to Waimea County. And so the county is in the process of developing those 400 acres. They're going to put in a bike path. They're going to put in some affordable housing. They're going to do some farms. So, I'm excited to see those kinds of developments happening.

I don't know why I'm drawn to Kaua'i, specifically. I love Hilo; I like Oahu; I have friends who live there and I go visit them. But Kaua'i will always be home. 65 years later, I live on the same street that I grew up on. Not in the same house, but just four doors down.

And that's kind of unusual and special. My sister comes and stays with me for six months out of the year and she knows, you know, “Oh, that's Mr. Tokioka's house” and “That's the Moyers.” It's good to have that, uh, warmth of community here.