

Kauai Community Science Center

Interviewer: Sasha Lee, The Hanapepe Hero

Interviewee: Sarah Styan, The Kauai Community Science Center

Organization Background:

The Kauai Community Science Center (KCSC) is a non-profit center that showcases science and technology, supported by professionals and shared with the community.

Sasha: Sarah, can you briefly describe your work at the Kauai Community Science Center and how it started?

Sarah: The Kauai Community Science Center is a science center that showcases science and technology, driven by student interest. The impetus for starting it was that for the first 17 years I was here on Kauai, I worked as a scientist and my daughter was born and raised here during that time. I was involved in a different community organization and saw that there was such a need for just opportunities for students especially in the area of science, technology, engineering, and art.

So when the organization I had worked for went through a merger, my position was eliminated. I had a great job for 17 years and that was just something that happened and impacted thousands of people in the organization around the world, but it gave me an opportunity to start something new.

Being able to live in this wonderful community for 18 years, I felt like I should try and do something to support, especially education. Our whole education system on Kauai is moving towards project based and career connected learning.

The original concept of Kauai Community Science Center was creating a science center where exhibits were developed by students. Our main objective is putting students in the lead so that they're the ones deciding our content, developing our content, and sharing it back with the community. And in essence, serving to educate the community and overall growing science literacy.

Sasha: What communities does KCSC mainly serve?

Sarah: K-12, the whole spectrum. We're a very small organization and have open events like STEAM night in elementary schools. We started doing them virtually back in 2021 and 2022. It was only at the end of 2022 when we could start doing them in person. At one STEM night, for example, we brought a functional model, the West Bay Energy project that was developed by high school students through our internship program.

Sasha: Are there any other impactful projects that you want to share?

Sarah: During COVID, we did a project with 52 middle school students. There was a science teacher at their school who had an elective class for students to create exhibits for KCSC. I wrote a grant with the Science Center in Ithaca, New York, one of my collaborators.

So the students had support from their teacher, a project based learning based teacher, and the exhibit designer. I also connected students to relevant professionals to the students based on their projects. So we started in October of 2019 by February of 2020, we had 21 prototype exhibits.

Even though in March this ended because of COVID, it was enough time for me to see that by bringing in a project based learning teacher and having a professional exhibit designer, my concept was valid.

Currently, we have a Ford Transit van that creates a mobile wifi hotspot, and we also have laser and vinyl cutters. I collaborated with Carnegie Science Center, the Steam Truck in Atlanta, and again, the Science Center in Ithaca to help me write grants for these.

Since 2020, we've had a seabird searching program that we actually pay students to do because it's a part of a mandate from the National Fish and Wildlife Seabird Habitat Conservation Plan. So it really fits our model of the students getting exposed to real world experience.

In this case, it involves government-like regulatory agencies, the private sector, and other conservation organizations that we've connected with. So the students learn not just about the seabirds, but how these organizations fit together and get real work experience.

Another example of this vision is our robotic summer camp that's been designed and developed by 2 students. We just finished our 3rd year of that. They design the curriculum. They run the camp. Even this year, they did all of the communication with parents and participants. We were able to purchase new VEX, the XP kits, which are backside Q kits. For the first two camps, then we had the VEX EXP kits this year, so a metal version, and they had 20 students and five student mentors.

Sasha: What energizes you about KCSC?

Sarah: Well, it's the community I live in. I just love this community. I just feel so fortunate that, even though I am a transplant here and I've only been here on Kaua'i for 21 years, that my daughter was born, raised, and grew up here. There's no way I can express how grateful I am to be part of this community.

The seabird searching program, quite honestly, I was considering not running it this year because my mom passed in April. I'm planning her celebration of life in September. I was feeling overwhelmed, but I ran into one of the students and they were all excited.

And I was just like, okay, I have to figure out how I can do this because I saw a student with potential who was interested and who could get something out of it. You know, that's really what it's about.

In one of the grants, I had to write recently, they asked how our organization defines equity, and I hadn't previously done that. But the exercise was really powerful. For us, it comes down to increasing awareness, because if you don't know, accessibility can't be improved. Our goal is to increase access to science, grow science literacy, promote climate change awareness, and just have a safe and respectful place.

