

# Kumu's Cupboard Interview

Interviewer: Sasha Lee, The Hanapepe Hero

Interviewee: Elyse Litvack, Kumu's Cupboard

## Company Background:

Kumu's Cupboard is a non-profit store where teachers and educational staff can shop for free. Located in Kukui Grove Marketplace in Lihue, they provide school supplies, office supplies, materials for art and science projects, and student incentives.

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

**Elyse:** Kumu's Cupboard is a 501(c)(3) non-profit where we supply classroom supplies to our island educators. It's public, private and charter K12.

They can shop with us once a month and we don't have a cash register. Everything that we have in the store is free to them. We carry what you would think of school and office supplies, math, science, a whole wall of new books, literacy, teacher supplies, student incentives. We also carry some very gently used items so that we continue to not fill the landfill.

We also house a resource center where teachers can come in and do lamination and combine things like that. We have a non-consumable lending service of 80 odd items that can be checked out everywhere from math manipulative science kits, a few instruments, and literature sets. So, our goal is to provide educators with some of the things that they need for the classroom.

On average, last year, we reported that educators are spending over \$950 out of pocket per year to supply their classrooms. There is a limit on how much they can take of each item when they come and some teachers come every month and others come occasionally, just depending on their needs.

As of the other day, we were up to serving over 450 educators on the island, which is a lot for the island. And we believe that we are serving teachers at every public, private and charter school.

**Sasha:** What inspired you to start your initiative?

**Elyse:** I met the co-founder, I had met a few times doing volunteer work on the island and we were talking at an event and we decided we should do something to help teachers. I'm a retired educator. She had taught for a while and then worked in child care and moved on to other things.

And we kept talking about it. And one day I said, either we do something or we stop talking. We moved forward and it's been very bootstraps, you know, okay, we got a space donated. We got a board. I learned how to write 501(c)(3) applications. You know, everything's been done as a need arises.

So we're learning as we go. We're the only teacher store on the island and in Hawaii, whether it's a paid store or not. I was an educator for 30 years and I was one of the people that was spending out of pocket. Not only is there that monetary expenditure, but a lot of things are difficult to get here on Kauai. Shopping for the good and bad of it is limited, so we bring a lot of things in bulk, which reduces shipping costs. So we're able to bring in some things that aren't available here on the island as well.

**Sasha:** What impact are you trying to make?

**Elyse:** We estimate 8,000 to 10,000 kids are impacted by what we do. So we know we're having an impact on the students, because we've heard from teachers that their students have said, "We need supplies— you need to go to Kumu's Cupboard."

There's a section of the store called the specialty table where they have to bring a thank you note and it's either written by the kids or the educators and we get some great notes and projects from kids. So I think it's really important. When I was a teacher and I would get donations, I'd spread them out and say, look at, you know, the community cares about your learning.

But also I think, our mission statement says to provide educators with the tools they need to enrich and enhance their curriculum. But we go beyond that because we feel that it's really important to connect educators to the community and to make people more aware of what educators need.

When we first opened our doors, a teacher said to me, “The first time I came here, I went to my truck and I cried.” I said “Was somebody rude to you?” And she said, “I've taught on the island for 10 years and this is the first time I knew the community cared.”

For our educators, we try to connect them to scholarships, connect them to mentors. Our board also believes that if we're out in the community asking for money, we need to be out in the community contributing to other organizations. So we're really involved in the Hotel Industry Charity Walk, we help the Chamber, United Way, and work with a bookseller to get books to kids for Read Across America.

So we want to be part of the community and put education out there to the business people in ways that maybe it hasn't been before. So giving people things is what we do, but there's more involved than that.

**Sasha:** What are some major challenges you have faced?

**Elyse:** Well, we were very fortunate to have the space donated because otherwise we couldn't exist. Getting supplies, getting money, we're constantly out there in the community trying to raise awareness and raise funds. You know, somebody asked me recently that was looking to give us a grant, “How much do you need?”

And I said, that's hard because everything. Our overhead is very small and everything we give back to the teachers. If we get money we don't think we'll get again, like we got a grant from a national organization that picks a different theme every year and finds places, then we do something special with it. We've been giving mini grants to teachers and we're spreading them out over a few years. So they have the opportunity to get something they normally wouldn't have.

We're an all volunteer run organization. Nobody gets paid. So, everything from cleaning bathrooms, fixing air conditioners, you know, everything we do.

It's challenging. But every time I feel a challenge and think, "Why am I doing this?" then an educator shares with me the impact we've had on them and their students. And that's enough to keep us going. And we're learning as we go, we're constantly trying to grow. About a month ago, we opened a long overdue Hawaiian Studies section. One of our board members worked with some Kumus, we wanted to make sure that if we did it, we did it well. So, I guess the challenge is to keep it going, keep it vibrant and to keep teachers interested in coming.

I'm trying to find new and different things. There's the things that we know they're always going to need, but changing up the special things, changing up the incentives, adding new things, increasing the limits that they can take.

It's a lot of work, but it's definitely a labor of love.

**Sasha:** What energizes you about your community?

**Elyse:** Well, I mean I was an educator for 30 years, and I believe that educators have a really big impact on our keiki, who are our future.

It inspires me to see what educators are doing, the creative things they're doing and how they care about the students they teach. So to see that we have powerful educators out there is really inspiring. And, you know, across the nation and in Kauai, there's a definite shortage of educators and anything we can do to help keep and encourage educators.

You know, I've heard from a few people that our store has been used as a recruiting tool. And I think that we have a very unique community here in the sense that there's a lot of aloha and there's a lot of care. And when need arises, the community steps up, and we want to make sure that education is part of that whole fabric.