

Resilient Roots Hawaii Interview

Interviewer: Sasha Lee, The Hanapepe Hero

Interviewee: Emilio Romero-Ruiz, Resilient Roots Hawaii

Company Background:

A grassroots company that works with local farmers to produce high-quality, organic food products, namely their gluten-free flours. They are committed to advancing sustainable agriculture on Kauai and adhering to fair trade practices.

In 2020, they launched the community outreach program West Kaua'i Community Shade Houses which gives tenants both the space to start their agricultural business and a community of fellow local farmers to support them.

Sasha: What inspired you to start your initiative?

Emilio: Well, I believe that entrepreneurship is the foundation of a self-sufficient community. By having more individuals become entrepreneurs, I think it's better for the community, [it] creates more work. We have more products. We have competition between entrepreneurs, and it just grows the economy.

What made me start [Resilient Roots] was [that] I reached out to a bunch of companies, big companies out here to see who's willing to help us entrepreneurs. And along my journey, I've had other farmers and other entrepreneurs really support me, and that kind of just made me establish what I'm doing here at the West Kaua'i Community Shade Houses. I think that there's nowhere in Hawaii where you can just submit an application, and someone gives you a shade house, a 3000 square foot shade house, and all you do is submit a business plan to just get things going.

Sasha: What impact are you looking to make?

Emilio: Self sufficiency for the island. The youth needs to see how entrepreneurs work and the struggles they go through. And dedication and hard work and then seeing them succeed for someone to see that it inspires you to do yourself. And if they can do it, we can do it.

It's also creating more jobs because there are no jobs here on the west side [of Kaua'i]. And I believe that it's feeding the community with everything we're producing, and these guys are producing a lot. At the shade houses, they're pretty amazing.

Sasha: What major challenges have you faced?

Emilio: The shade houses were [initially] abandoned. They were actually portable. You know Corteva? It's a company here on the west side of Waimea. They had these shade houses that were abandoned for seven years. The shade houses were broken down. And when I reached out to them, one of their one of the individuals from there was like, Hey, we have these shade houses that if you have something you can do with it, you know, let's make something happen.

So after a year and a half of negotiating, this is through COVID. A year and a half of just zoom meetings going back and forth. I asked her all their questions and we just kept moving forward, insurance everything. I was able to get the shade houses in 2020, I believe.

And, then I just said, all right, here we go. I'm just going to fund it myself. So that's basically what I did. I did have a nonprofit with me in the beginning, but they decided to bounce from the project. So I just said, I'm going to keep going with it. This is what I want to do and obviously it's actually showing results with the entrepreneurs.

Sasha: What energizes you about your community at Resilient Roots?

Emilio: It's all about working together.

I mean, these entrepreneurs learn from each other. It's important that we see what the other person is doing and how they're doing it and not be competitive. I mean, when I first did this, there was this, this sense of, "Oh, if he's doing watermelons, I can't do watermelons". And I try to explain to everybody, if all of us made watermelons, we wouldn't even hit the market.

I mean, the market is so huge and you can't really be successful as individuals. We need to work together as a community to fulfill the markets here on Kaua'i.