



# OHA: A Celebration Of Ten Years

## OHA: The Beginning—Part Two

*Editor's note: Last month, we began "OHA: A Celebration of 10 Years" with a survey of the events leading to creation of the Office of Hawaiian Affairs and an introduction to some of the people who had the vision to see it through. In "OHA — The Beginning, Part II", we look at OHA's first two years of operation, a time of tremendous expectations and limited resources, when ideas about OHA's future poured forth as freely as cascades from the Ko'olau pali after rain.*

by Curt Sanburn  
Special to Ka Wai Ola O OHA

A basic rule among historians is to put a distance of at least 20 years between the occurrence of events and any assessment of their meaning. That judgement of OHA won't come until 2001. Today, OHA is still history in the making.

That sense of development is usually understood and written about from an instinctively Hawaiian point of view: OHA is always described as a living being. Auntie Frenchy DeSoto is the mother of OHA. OHA was born in 1978. OHA took its first faltering steps in 1980.

And like any child born into the large, loving, disparate and demanding Hawaiian family, arguments over how OHA should be raised and what she will grow up to be are passionate — and still unresolved.

### Point Zero

On Nov. 6, 1980, just two days after their election, the new trustees had their first meeting at the State Capitol Auditorium in front of over 100 well-wishers. It was an informal session, a *kukakuka* session lasting three hours. They discussed staffing, funding, organization, interim committees, a proposed retreat for trustees so that they could get to know each other better and develop team spirit. Protocol at the upcoming inauguration of trustees in front of 'Iolani Palace was an important subject. And the trustees scheduled their next informal meeting at Kenny's Coffee Shop in Kalihi.

The trustees, led by interim chairwoman Frenchy DeSoto, vowed unity among themselves, but unity within the Hawaiian community would prove elusive from the outset. The Protect Kaho'olawe 'Ohana (PKO), one of Hawaii's most influential grassroots Hawaiian organizations, was already determined to steer away from OHA and, before the trustees had even been elected, announced that it could not support the infant agency.

PKO leaders were troubled by the fact that OHA was a state agency, subject to budgetary review by the Legislature and thus not a independent entity. Others said they didn't approve of voting nor competitive campaigning for the OHA trusteeships. These were western, *haole* practices, it was pointed out.

The split turned two OHA trustees and former PKO stalwarts, Frenchy DeSoto and Walter Ritte, away from their more militant 'Ohana buddies and caused rifts and factions that still exist today. With PKO's vocal non-support, other Hawaiian activists joined the anti-OHA chorus . . . all this before the Office even had an office.

There was no office. There was no staff, no phone, no place to hang your hat.

Ritte recalls the feeling of the trustees in those first uncertain days: "It was like 'Now what do we



A. Frenchy DeSoto, chair of the first OHA Board of Trustees.

do?' We were all sitting there looking at each other, wondering 'What is this thing? What is OHA? What are we going to do?'

"We were so nervous we got busy. We formed some committees — money, government, culture. I had ten things I wanted to do. Solomon had ten things she wanted to do. Frenchy had 15 things she wanted to do, but we had no resources."

Not exactly true. The 1980 Legislature had set aside \$250,000 for OHA's operating expenses, and there was a tentative sum of \$1.2 million ready for OHA as its estimated first annual payment from the ceded land trust.

"We were all trying to figure out how to manage this beast called OHA," says Trustee Moses Keale. "We didn't know how to get the money. We were using our own money to fly inter-island, and we never got reimbursed. Here we were, nine trustees using our own money because we didn't know how to go get the funds. Who do you ask? The governor? We didn't know."

Trustee Rod Burgess says "We started with a blank piece of paper, a statute a couple of paragraphs long. Then we had one employee, an office with no furniture . . . and the phone ringing off the hook with expectations of the people. We were deluged with calls, hundreds of calls, everybody needing help and expecting us to help them."

### Ho'oponopono

At the first official meeting on Nov. 26, 1980, the trustees hired OHA's first employee, an executive secretary, Martin Wilson, who had worked tirelessly during the 1978 Constitutional Convention when OHA was born; later he helped organize the OHA elections.

Frenchy DeSoto was unanimously elected chairman of the board and Joseph Kealoha from Maui got the vice chairmanship. Six committees (Economic Development; Land and Natural Resources; Education; Culture; Health and Human Resources; and Budget) were established with trustees assigned as committee chairmen, staff and pencil sharpeners.

Two months later, the trustees secured a small office in the Kawaiahao Plaza office building (also home to the Bishop Estate offices) in downtown Honolulu next to Kawaiahao Church and the Mission Houses Museum. The 900-square-foot office was furnished with three pieces of surplus military furniture and contained the one



Joseph Kealoha, first vice-chairman.

employee, Martin Wilson, who knew how to keep books and cash checks.

Within a year and a half there were 32 staff people and the office had expanded to 3,000 square feet. Edwin Auld was the administrator, in the chief executive position at OHA. Francis Kauhane, a bearded, intense graduate of UH Law School, was the government affairs officer. Sam Apuna, a retired Army colonel who habitually saluted everyone, ran research and planning, the division that was supposed to monitor state government functions that would impact OHA's affairs, as well as provide staff assistance to the standing committees. Jennifer Enos, known for her big smile, was a clerk typist in the administrative section. Steve Kuna, a brawny Vietnam veteran who played football at St. Louis High School and went on to get a law degree, was a young man obsessed with the public land trust issue. His mission was to educate anyone who would listen, which made him a natural for the job of land and natural resources officer.

"It was a period of blind, unquestioning dedication," Martin Wilson says. "No one saw a career ladder at OHA back then; they just had a firm belief in the cause. The task given the resources was such a mismatch — there were lots of late nights."

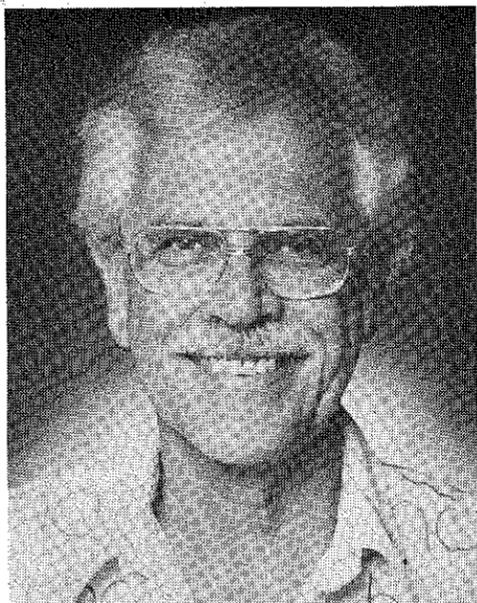
A kupuna named Gregory Nali'i'elua but called "Papa Kala" needed employment. The trustees asked the 73-year-old wise man from Wai'anae if he would sit with them during their meetings and lead their prayers. Looking back, several of the trustees agreed that Papa Kala provided some much needed spiritual stability in those rocky early days.

The members of that first board are also just about unanimous in their sharpest memories of the early days: the huge disagreements about what needed to be done, what needed to be done first and how it should be done. As Burgess remembers, "The decision-making process took awhile. . . . Nobody had a clear vision of what our agency was or where it was headed."

Trustee Malama Solomon from Kohala wanted to hire the best native-rights lawyers in the U.S. and immediately set about getting court rulings on Hawaiian claims against the state and federal governments. She also wanted to buy the Hawaiian radio station, KCCN, as well as an old mansion in Nu'uuanu to serve as OHA

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**The first OHA trustees:**



**Roy Benham**



**Walter Ritte**



**Rod Burgess**

headquarters. Other trustees angled to get the handsome Linekona School building on Thomas Square in Honolulu as headquarters, but the Honolulu Art Academy got the school and OHA stayed in an office.

Roy Benham, a former teacher at Kamehameha Schools and personnel officer with the U.S. Army, wanted to set up a clear-cut role for the trustees as policy makers who leave the committees as staff. "But the damn thing got away from me," he says, "and suddenly the trustees and their committees were the recipients of funds, not just the dispensers."

Benham also wanted to set up a Hawaiian bank, but the plan fizzled after a similar experiment set up by the Filipino community went belly up.

Walter Ritte was the election's highest vote-getter and one of the shining heroes of the grassroots Hawaiian rights movement. He held special dispensation among the trustees and used his momentum to initiate an ambitious cultural program and take the lead from the start. He wanted the trustees to enter the political fray up front, grassroots style, answering every call for help, every land dispute and flashpoint as it came. He and Auntie Frenchy were very close and usually voted together. "We've got to be fighters before we can be peacemakers," Ritte says about his political philosophy.

But Trustee Joe Kealoha, a realtor, wasn't so sure. "Is OHA going to turn into a political advocacy group for every issue for native Hawaiians, or are we going to organize ourselves as a broad-based organization where we can address all problems?"

"The bickering arose because of these kinds of discussions," Kealoha says. He calls Ritte's habit of getting involved in the hot issues "parachuting."

"In the early meetings," Kealoha says, "we would use ho'oponopono. That was really important many, many times during debates and different crises we had. Frenchy said we didn't need Roberts Rules of Order, and so we would go around the table, but it took too damn long, and we went back to Roberts."

Rod Burgess, a Honolulu businessman, was practical, aggressive and progressive. He knew all about the ceded lands and reparations issues and was in charge of the Land and Natural Resources Committee. Looking back, he criticizes the trustees who were wary of the "hot potato" controversies like Federal reparations and Kaho'olawe. He calls them "gun-shy."

... Most likely he was talking about Benham or Kealoha or Keale, the guys who wanted to run OHA like a business or a social service agency, rather than as a political hammer.

Trustee Tommy Kaulukukui, the gentleman athlete from Kalihi, wanted careful cooperation with the other, older, more established Hawaiian groups. "We were trying to bring all the groups together," Uncle Tommy recalls. "We needed help from the other organizations. We were trying to say that nine of us can't do the job alone."

To generalize about the notorious differences among the trustees, you could say there were the liberals and conservatives, just like any group of

elected office holder. The "liberals" wanted to blaze new paths; the "conservatives" wanted to work through established channels. But for some reason, the haole press was vaguely patronizing about the "difficulties" experienced by the "diverse" trustees. OHA was criticized, in fact, for having more than one opinion about its future. **"Get a surfboard"**

Like everyone else, the press was impatient; and lurking in the background was an unspoken fear that OHA might one day actually become a serious player in the land-and-power game. The concern grew as details about native Hawaiian entitlements from the ceded land trust became more widely understood.

A 1983 editorial in the Honolulu Star-Bulletin predicted that satisfying Hawaiian demands for their fair share of income from the ceded lands (what had been royal lands before annexation) would lead to resentment from non-Hawaiians. "At present the funds OHA receives are too small to generate much criticism, but this could change," the newspaper said.

Federal reparations to the Hawaiian people based on the U.S. government's involvement in the overthrow of the sovereign Hawaiian nation was another sensitive — and new — topic.

Commenting on Trustee Rockne Freitas' call for special treatment for Hawaiians because of past inequities, popular Advertiser columnist Bob Krauss wrote in 1984, "It is easy to applaud this sentiment until OHA begins assigning blame to others for what happened to the Hawaiians. . ."

Apparently, Krauss was not ready to believe that anyone (except the Hawaiians) had done anything wrong; and that the dispossession of Hawaiians from their land, their low social and economic status, their poor health, etc., tragic as it was, was entirely their own fault.

In the same article, Krauss criticized an OHA slideshow that was making the rounds of all islands

for naming and showing old photographs of the haole leaders of the 1893 overthrow of Queen Lili'uokalani.

"These people have family in Hawai'i," Krauss pointed out indignantly, as if saving Thurstons and Wilders from the embarrassments of history was more important than setting the record straight.

"If it upsets you that we make waves from time to time, we suggest you get a surfboard," OHA Trustee Peter Apo wrote in early 1982, in a published response to an attack on OHA's "divisiveness" and its "separatist" leanings written by another Advertiser columnist, part-Hawaiian Sammy Amalu.

"Since you don't seem to know much about modern Hawai'i politics," Apo snapped, "here's the scene: It's kind of like trying to catch a New York subway during rush hour; without a little nudging and elbowing, you get left behind. It's the American way."

But OHA was not blameless, and some of the rifts that developed within the Hawaiian community, symbolized by Amalu's unhappiness and the Protect Kaho'olawe 'Ohana's silent disdain, were serious matters.

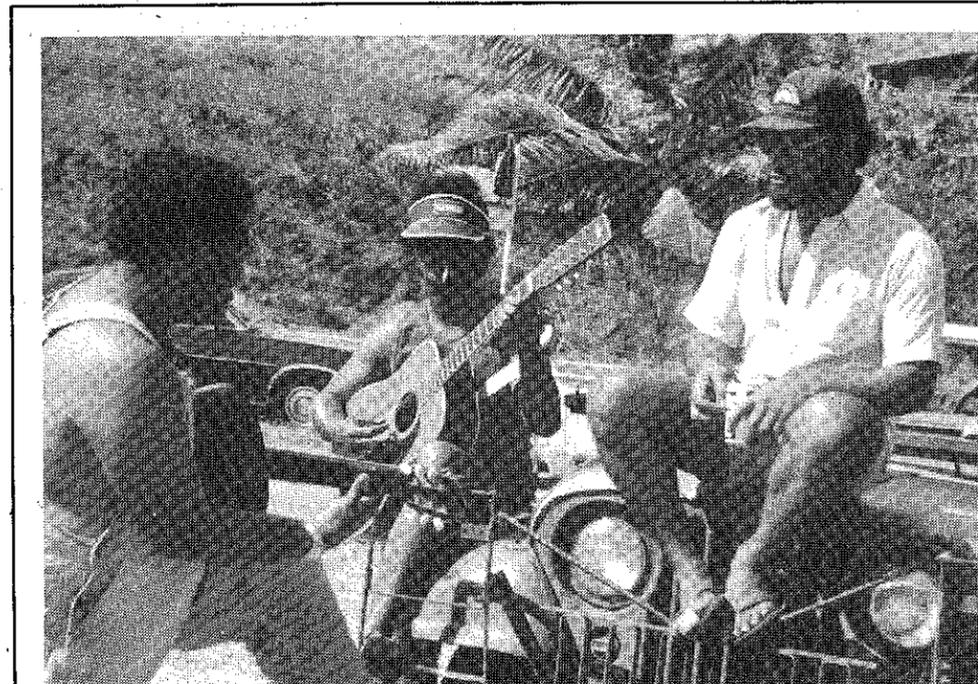
**OHA's first report card**

Winona Rubin worked hard to help establish OHA. As director from 1975 to 1986 of Alu Like, Inc., the successful private Hawaiian agency for federally funded social and economic programs, she was in a good position to do so. Her disaffection with OHA happened quickly.

She tells the story about Alu Like offering mailing lists, data bases, etc. to OHA trustees when they were first setting up house. She thought she could help, and, she says, there was no need to duplicate efforts. But OHA said no.

"They thanked us for the offer but wanted to do their own thing," Rubin says.

A year later, deepening concerns about OHA's



**The trustees' hosts supplied non-stop tunes and excellent company.**

**MELLOWING OUT ON**

A few months after the board of trustees in ea arranged a retreat for the Molokai, at a beach-front

Trustee Rod Burgess re fishing, and Trustee Frenchy retelling the events leading creation of OHA, so that t understand the political suddenly found themselves

"What are we here f profound question the t during the retreat, acco Behnam. He's not sure the however.

With lots of food prepar Molokai for their special music, the trustees got to and, for three days, enjoy peaceful periods in OHA's



# OHA

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organizing a pilot project for the agency involving small "gap" loans to native Hawaiian businesses, businesses that would otherwise be unable to participate in any of a number of state and private economic development loan programs. The trustees were also preparing gap loans for a papaya plantation hui in Puna and for a bodybuilder in Hilo who wanted to open a gym.

DPED asked if OHA could supply the gap loan for Hookala's boat, and the trustees agreed. A \$6,000 loan was approved with a 10-year term at 7.5% interest, working out to monthly payments of \$72. The loan is current today, payments are on time and the transaction is considered a "model loan" by OHA administrators. In other words, it seems that Hookala and his wife are catching the fish.

The two other loans in the pilot program, to the papaya hui and the bodybuilder, showed mixed results. The gym, with lead financing by a commercial bank, was a success, and the bodybuilder is now planning to open a second location. The papaya plantation, on the other hand, was a failure because of drought and the fruit-fly problem.

Unfortunately, OHA income could not support a greatly expanded gap loan campaign, but the pilot program proved that native Hawaiian businessmen with limited assets were not bad risks, and, for a while, the agency considered opening a bank for native Hawaiians. Finally, in 1989, the Native Hawaiian Revolving Loan Fund was set up to handle all OHA loans to Hawaiian businesses.

## OHA in action

In mid-1983, OHA published its first Status Report, an upbeat document listing a wide variety of activities by the agency's divisions.

Most significantly, the report noted that OHA was in the process of suing the state for its share of a financial settlement involving sand mining on ceded land on Moloka'i. The suit was the first indication that OHA, with or without the assistance of the state administration, would

vigorously pursue its rightful share of the public land trust revenues which had been set at 20 percent by the state Legislature.

In partnership with the Native Hawaiian Legal Corporation (NHLC), OHA funded the Native Hawaiian Land Title Project which had aided over 350 Hawaiians hoping to secure title to ancestral lands. This continuing project is a classic example of the kind of work a non-delivering agency does best. The funds, administered by OHA, fuel a program run by NHLC serving a large client base which may or may not be aware that OHA helped to fund the work.

A Hawaiian business directory was published with 400 entries (though never updated) to encourage commerce within the Hawaiian community. The agency pursued access to federal funds for small businesses through the Minority Enterprise Small Business Investment Corporation (MESBIC).

Walter Ritte's ambitious Cultural Plan, first draft, was an important pathfinder document for OHA and the Hawaiian community. The first important document to come out of OHA, the Cultural Plan identified key areas of Hawaiian cultural life for restoration, rehabilitation, and perpetuation and proposed various private and government actions to ensure the vitality of Hawaii's host culture. A symposium on taro cultivation was co-sponsored by OHA.

Thirty thousand dollars of OHA funds were given as a special grant to help the Bishop Museum fund publication of Mary Kawena Pukui's collection of traditional Hawaiian proverbs and sayings, "Olelo Noeau, Hawaiian Proverbs and Poetical Sayings." The anthology preserves the day-to-day philosophy, history, humor and wisdom of traditional Hawaiian society.

The Health and Human Resources committee determined there were three lethal diseases that threatened Hawaiians and set up pilot projects for the study of cancer, hypertension and alcoholism within the Hawaiian community. Existing agencies such as the Cancer Research Institute were requested to provide aid and expertise.

The Planning and Development Division distributed \$50,000 in 'Iliili Grants to various Hawaiian organizations. An effort to count the

Hawaiian community, both native Hawaiians and part-Hawaiians, was organized as the Population Survey/Needs Assessment Survey in order to figure out just how big OHA's job was. Committee members developed a multi-year Master Plan for the agency.

Reparations were a chief topic of concern for the Governmental/Community Affairs Division. They waited breathlessly — and a little skeptically — for the Reagan Administration's Native Hawaiian Study Commission report on reparations, which was to be published in late 1983.

In the State Legislature, the Division bird-dogged bills relating to Hawaiian issues, such as protection of the Milolii fishing community in South Kona; granting long-term leases for the residents of Maunaloa Valley, Makiki, O'ahu; and the leasing and disposition of state ceded lands in general.

Meanwhile, to keep everyone up to date and to remind everyone that OHA was out there, the Public Information Division began publication of Ka Wai Ola O OHA, the OHA newspaper of record, in 1981. It went out on a quarterly basis to 45,000 beneficiary households, government offices, libraries, etc. A few years later, the circulation rose to 55,000 and the newspaper became a monthly.

## "We are still a baby"

In the fall of 1982, four of the original trustees decided to end their terms with the Office of Hawaiian Affairs in order to run for state legislative offices. Aunty Frenchy ran for the Wai'anae Senate seat and lost, Roy Benham ran for an East Honolulu House seat and he lost. Malama Solomon ran for a Big Island Senate seat and won. Peter Apo ran for the Wai'anae/east Kaua'i House seat and won.

Five trustees remained; and four new trustees were elected to fill the vacancies: Hayden Burgess, an attorney and cousin of fellow trustee Rod Burgess; Piilani Desha, a realtor and businesswoman from the Big Island; Rockne Freitas, a former pro football player with the Detroit Lions and businessman from Honolulu; and Gard Kealoha, then an Alu Like employee and a publishing executive from Honolulu.

In early 1982, Rod Burgess was arrested for nude swimming at Kahala Beach in Honolulu. He said it was part of his culture. Later that year, he was charged in a scuffle with police. Both incidents made the newspaper headlines. Hayden Burgess attracted the glare of public attention when he refused to take a public oath of office during the trustees' swearing-in ceremonies at the State Capitol. He was a citizen of Hawai'i, he insisted, and not the United States. Such were the petty scandals of OHA's early years. It would get worse before it got better, but the agency was moving. Its controversies, chaos and confusion reflected a newly empowered and restless Hawaiian community reaching toward its own destiny.

In an interview with the Honolulu Star-Bulletin in December 1983, Lieutenant Governor John Waihee described OHA's beginnings the way many observers did, in terms of infancy: "... a newborn agency that never had time for childhood.

"Right from the start, OHA had to compete in the real world, to get out there and pitch. That's tough ... but what we wanted, what we dreamed about in '78 was to be in this situation. We dreamed about being able to stand up on our two feet and carry on, and not have some people begging somebody else that out of the goodness of the heart they should help us."

"We are still a baby," said the late kupuna, Papa Kala, in the same Star-Bulletin article, "We still need time to grow."

## Ten years later . . . an update

The Protect Kaho'olawe 'Ohana and the Office of Hawaiian Affairs, two organizations born in the turbulent 1970s, today in 1991 are working together to determine the terms and conditions for the U.S. Government's return of Kaho'olawe island to Hawai'i.

OHA Trustee Frenchy DeSoto, who once was an active member of PKO before leading the way for the creation of OHA in 1978, and Dr. Emmett Alui, a occasional critic of OHA and a leader of the PKO, are two of the five members of the Kaho'olawe Conveyance Commission.

The commission has two years to figure out how to clean up and stabilize the heavily eroded and bomb-scarred island and to recommend its best long-term fate. Other questions faced by the commission include the cost of clean-up, who will pay for clean-up, and which parts of the island will eventually be suitable for human habitation, if any. Their first meeting was held Dec. 17, 1990.

The almost 20-year struggle to stop the bombing of Kaho'olawe by the U.S. military brought political vigor to the Hawaiian rights movement and made the Hawaiian concept of "aloha 'aina" a rallying point for activists throughout the state.

Alu Like and the Office of Hawaiian Affairs have grown closer over the years as the OHA trustees and Alu Like directors

learn to coordinate their efforts and resources for the most efficient delivery of services to the Hawaiian community.

Right now, OHA and Alu Like are involved in several joint projects to benefit our community.

Contract arrangements between the two agencies allow applicants to OHA's Native Hawaiian Revolving Loan Fund to receive support and assistance from Alu Like's "entrepreneurship training outreach" program.

In other words, Alu Like will help OHA's Loan Fund applicants with their business plans, budget plans and other services.

OHA has also provided Alu Like with funds to support the research and planning efforts necessary for Alu Like to get federal grants for minority job-training and other programs.

On Maui, Alu Like and OHA are about to become "roommates." The tight commercial space market on Maui has encouraged the two agencies to look for shared office space in Wailuku and/or Kahului.

Lastly, OHA is helping to fund Alu Like's effort to list all Hawaiian-owned businesses in Hawaii. The list will be published in a booklet to encourage networking among Hawaiian businesses and to increase visibility for Hawaiian businesses in federal minority hiring programs.

Curt Sanburn is a local writer, educated at Iolani School and Yale, who writes on Hawai'i affairs.