



Love is a Life Skill: A Study of Love in a Hawaiian Transitional Housing Program

Penn Pantumsinchai
Lili'uokalani Trust

Brent Llaneza
Lili'uokalani Trust

Pālama Lee
Lili'uokalani Trust

Keywords: • Hawaii • Native Hawaiian • Culture • Aloha • Transitional-aged youth • Systems-involved youth • Opportunity youth • Life skills • Executive functioning • Communication • Foster care

Abstract

Love comes in many shapes and may be directed in many directions, be it to oneself, a romantic partner, one's family, the community, and so forth. In Hawaiian culture, one of the most important values is aloha. More than a simple greeting, it is love with all its depths and complexities including pilina (relationships) and 'ōiwi (native intelligence), among many other values. This article describes how aloha as love was taught and reinforced as a life skill for 'ōpio (young adults) living in a transitional housing program in Hawai'i. 'Ōpio who have lived experiences with systems such as foster care, juvenile justice, and houselessness often lack the life skills to manage daily life and maintain supportive relationships, leading to cycles of struggles as adults. Yet they have a great capacity for love that can be honed into life skills such as communication, emotional regulation, boundary setting, and reconciliation. This paper tells the mo'olelo (stories) of 'ōpio learning the life skills of love and the staff who sought to build an 'ohana-like (family) community.

Aloha aku, aloha mai. When love is given, love is received. This 'ōlelo no'eau or poetic saying speaks to the generative power of aloha as it is shared, it grows exponentially.

Aloha shapes and contributes to individual, family, and community wellbeing. Yet, Aloha is not a singular value, it too is shaped and influenced by many other values. Aunty Betty Jenkins, a Native Hawaiian elder, stated in 2011, each Native Hawaiian value does not stand alone. This would be unfathomable in the Hawaiian universe full of connections. One value is only at the surface and hundreds of other values lay underneath the surface to enhance, define, and describe it. Aloha is love in all forms – gentleness, harmony, agreeableness, humility, patience – as taught by kūpuna (elder) 'Anakē Pilahi Pāki.

This article describes how love was reinforced as a life skill with young adults, hereby referred to by its Hawaiian equivalent, ‘ōpio, in a residential program during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. While aloha was the primary value taught, coached, and lived throughout the program, many other values walked alongside Aloha such as pilina or building sustainable and trusting relationships and ‘ōiwi or native intelligence and cultural identity. These values contributed to the ‘ōpio’s love for self, for their partners, family, and community.

A glossary of Hawaiian words is provided in the Appendix.

The Case Study

To highlight the meaning and nature of love in Hawaiian culture, we turn to a transitional housing program and facility located in Hawai‘i as a case study. The facility, dubbed Hale (Hawaiian word for home) in this paper for the purposes of confidentiality, was sponsored by a local Native Hawaiian serving organization, whose mission is to support destitute and orphaned Native Hawaiian children to becoming contributing, thriving adults. Native Hawaiians as an indigenous people historically have faced colonial oppression and subsequent disproportionate challenges related to systems-involvement, poverty, health disparities, and much more (Kamehameha Schools, 2021; Lili‘uokalani Trust, 2022; Office of Hawaiian Affairs, 2010). These vicious cycles constitute generational trauma that can be healed through strength and resilience in cultural identity, spirituality, traditional practices, and the Native Hawaiian worldview. Hence, the organization provides cultural-based, trauma-informed social support services, youth enrichment activities, and holistic wraparound services.

Hale opened as an emergency crisis response to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and housed 46 individuals, all of whom had Native Hawaiian ancestry. As a transitional housing program, it focused on helping ‘ōpio in crisis who were involved in systems: foster care, juvenile justice, and houselessness. While the primary target age was 18-26 years, the program made exceptions for babies and children, as well as one individual who was 67 years old. It was the organization’s first foray into serving those over 18 years of age. Forty-six percent of the residents were ‘ōpio (18-26), 37% were minors under 18 years old, and 17% were adults over 27 years old. There was a mixture of single ‘ōpio and couples with or without children. As the ‘ōpio (18-26) were the primary target population, the philosophy and approach to group programs and direct services were geared towards them. This paper thus focuses primarily on this age group of ‘ōpio that lived at Hale.

Individuals who became residents were invited to join because they were Native Hawaiian and had been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in some way, such as job loss or houselessness. Based on in-depth psychosocial assessments, there were consistent challenges for the ‘ōpio such

as health disparities and multi-systems involvement (foster care, juvenile justice, etc.). Additionally, they carried heavy generational trauma related to neglect, abuse, isolation, and more. The challenges and opportunities for growth of the ‘ōpio are illustrative of the experiences of those who exit out of systems.

Data

The data source for this paper comes primarily from the evaluation of Hale’s operational year. This includes a wide variety of data such as staff interviews, psychosocial assessments, ‘ōpio focus groups, ‘ōpio exit interviews, incident reports, staff observations, Data Assessment Plan (DAP) notes, service plans, and other informal observations.

Life Skills and Systems-Involved Youth

The ‘ōpio of Hale represent systemic failures to provide continuity of care as youth age out of various institutional systems, namely foster care, juvenile justice, houselessness, and even poverty. The individual nuances and experiences of each system is beyond the scope of this paper; therefore, we consider systems-involved youth as a broad category with similar lived experiences and challenges. That said, our focus leans more towards youth who were in foster care, as juvenile justice and houselessness are common byproducts of being in foster care.

Those who age or transition out of systems are often forgotten once they become legal adults, but it does not necessarily mean they are ready to live independently. Studies have found that systems-involved ‘ōpio often lack life skills and support in order to survive and thrive (Benbenishty & Zeira, 2012; Carrera et al., 2019; Fry et al., 2017; Martin-Grissom, n.d.; Olson et al., 2017). The negative impacts of being systems-involved can last a long time, with effects on cognitive functioning, executive functioning, life skills, and attachment (defined by the program as the skills, knowhow, and capacity to navigate everyday life and tasks).

“Young people who have experienced homelessness, foster care, or poverty seem to show cognitive difficulties to a greater extent than their peers without these experiences” (Fry et al., 2017, p. 24). Cognitive functions such as selective attention, memory impairment, and inhibitory control are common struggles (Fry et al., 2017; Lonkar, 2022). Such cognitive functions are often tested as this group “are more likely to face challenging situations – as well as have higher rates of mental illness – than their peers without these experiences, which may compromise adaptation and recovery from adversity” (Fry et al., 2017, p. 5).

Mental health related struggles add more complexity to the mix. While we look at correlation more so than causation, there is a relationship between cognitive impairment, mental health, and attachment. “Foster experiences often include disruptions in attachment, and this can have a range of developmental consequences” (Lonkar, 2022, p. 40). Age and length of stay in a system such as foster care are also factors. “Foster children exposed to early adversity have shown higher rates of attachment difficulties, which, in turn, increased risks of mental health problems.” (Lonkar, 2022, p. 56). In short, the longer a child remains in foster care, the more at risk they are to have intrapersonal and interpersonal challenges, such as disrupted relationships. This finding particularly hits home when we see that Native Hawaiian children are disproportionately represented in the foster care system, and stay in the system comparatively longer than non-Native Hawaiian youth (Hofschneider, 2022; Perez et al., 2016; State of Hawai‘i Department of Human Services, 2019).

Having grown up in an unstable home life without close and consistent supporting relationships means that ‘ōpio age out without much social safety nets. They may not have a network of loving family and friends to help teach them how to navigate independent living, while they themselves lack the life skills or executive functioning to survive and thrive. “A significant portion of young people leaving care do not possess the life skills or resources necessary to make successfully the transition from care to independent living” (Benbenishty & Zeira, 2012, p. 3). In a study examining the decision-making skills of foster alumni, Olson et al. (2017, p. 4) found that many foster alumni reported they did not think about ways of dealing with a problem nor think before making a choice. A majority of these individuals stated they were not taught how to deal with a problem, instead learned primarily through making mistakes and by trial and error...they needed to make hasty choices, and lacked the time or support for the task of ‘thinking before making a choice.’

Not having time or social support to navigate daily life, coupled with the cognitive impairments resulting from time in systems can prove challenging for ‘ōpio. As such, aged out youth are at higher risk for contact with the juvenile justice system (if they were not already in contact), not completing their education, being unemployed, experiencing relational violence, using and abusing illegal substances, and/or becoming homeless, thus further drowning them in a cycle of impoverishment (Cutuli et al., 2016; Shah et al., 2017). The effects of such challenging experiences are long term as such youth become more likely to commit adult offenses and experience adult homelessness, further perpetuating generational cycle of trauma.

Yet all hope is not lost, there are many evidence-based practices and programs that can help. ‘Ōpio possess many strengths of their own. They have resiliency and creativity in ways that help them survive, and their capacity for love is great (Benbenishty & Zeira, 2012; Fry et al., 2017). ‘Ōpio are able to “create positive relationships with friends and are willing and able to contribute and help them,” though who they make friends with may be questionable (Benbenishty & Zeira, 2012).

Positive peer and familial relationships, built on trust, care, and love, can help promote positive life outcomes. “Young people need stable, long-lasting relationships with adults...someone they can call at midnight when they are on the side of the road with a flat tire...Youth who age out of foster care are not deficient. They, like non-foster youth, need and deserve permanent connections and to be adequately prepared for adulthood” (Benbenishty & Zeira, 2012, p. 41). To encourage the development of a strong social support network, ‘ōpio must feel secure and have stability to mitigate the stigma and negative social identity of being systems-involved (Lonkar, 2022, p. 63).

Working on life skills, communication skills, and relationship support therefore are key ways to help transitioning ‘ōpio succeed. Feelings of love and working how to love in healthy ways are important at all levels, from the self, to family, peers, and even the community (Benbenishty & Zeira, 2012; Forenza et al., 2018; Fry et al., 2017; Lausten & Frederiksen, 2016; Lonkar, 2022). “When foster youth are civically engaged, their outcomes are better, specifically psychological empowerment and a sense of belonging (Forenza et al., 2018; Lonkar, 2022, p. 33).

This is where Hale’s cultural approach of love as a life skill comes in – combining both the needs for supportive relationships and life skills to navigate daily life for systems-involved youth.

Love at Hale

It is well-established in the literature that those who want to work with systems-involved ‘ōpio should operate with a low barrier philosophy (Blakeborough et al., 2014; Evans, 2011; Giffords et al., 2007; Nnawulezi et al., 2018; Pedersen et al., 2016; Tucker et al., 2018). Low barrier describes a service or provider that makes help as easily accessible and user friendly as possible, one that tries to minimize barriers such as paperwork, waiting lists, eligibility requirements as well as physical and staff related characteristics that can stand in the way of people getting their needs met. The doors are open and accessible; staff are friendly and non-judgmental (City of Portland, 2013).

At Hale, the low barrier philosophy was well-matched with the value of aloha, a non-judgmental, deep, and universal love. When asked what ‘low barrier‘ meant to them, the staff generally agreed that it meant “accepting the client where they are, as they are.” Whether the client was on drugs, abused alcohol, or had a criminal record did not matter – staff accepted the young person as they were without judgment. This allowed healing and trusting pilina (relationships) to be formed between staff and the ‘ōpio, thus building ‘ohana (family)-like relationships. ‘Ōpio who came through the doors were also of similar background and history, and found much in common, thus fostering more pilina and feelings of ‘ohana. Youth were able to see themselves as part of a larger community and felt the shared kuleana (responsibility) to contribute to the collective wellbeing.

Hale was established as something akin to a Pu‘uhonua – “a sacred place of refuge” (National Park Service, 2017).

An integral foundational philosophy embedded in the concepts of Pu‘uhonua is aloha ‘āina, the compassion or love for that which sustains life—the land, sea, water and all the elements and animals within. The land connects the people to the heartbeat of the gods in a physical way through wahi pana (sacred or pulsating places). (p. 11)

Meeting the young person for the first time, staff would be unguarded and open. Staff may be aware of the incoming young person’s history, which may include abuse, trauma, addiction, arrest, and so forth but such knowledge was not used against the young person. Background history was used to inform the staff of the client’s level of service and needs so that they can properly provide tailored support and trauma-informed, holistic care.

In daily practice, working with ‘ōpio in an aloha-driven, low barrier space meant striking a balance between compassion, promoting personal responsibility on the part of the young person, and preventing future problematic behavior. Teaching ‘ōpio how to love as a lifeskill helped them understand the role they played within a community. Risky behavior such as drinking or drug use was discouraged for individual and community safety. With the love of aloha and low barrier philosophy at its core foundation, let us look at how love was worked on as a life skill in other aspects of Hale, from case consultation to group programs and activities.

Developing Love as a Life Skill

Hale provided trauma-informed wraparound services rooted in Hawaiian culture. The services ran the gambit of wellbeing, from physical, mental, and spiritual. Other services such as getting documentation and identification, employment, educational support, childcare, transportation, financial literacy, housing were also provided.

The highest service needs of residents included Relationships Strengthening (e.g., couples counseling, parenting classes), Educational-Vocational Development (e.g., obtaining GED), Housing Stabilization (e.g., qualifying for permanent housing programs), and Behavioral Health Stabilization (e.g., therapy, sobriety support). As programs and staff rose to meet these needs, the underlying strategy was to teach love as a life skill that will open doors to a thriving adulthood for the residents. This included structuring services and programs around social emotional learning (SEL).

SEL was used to help ‘ōpio understand the relationship between their emotions and behaviors in relation to their own self-worth. Self-regulation and making connections with others through healthy communication practices was emphasized in all aspects of Hale. Staff for example would model appropriate relationships and communication skills for the ‘ōpio to follow. For example, staff would demonstrate how to ask questions about a topic, how to resolve conflicts peacefully, active listening techniques, and how to increase self-awareness and better understand their behavior cycle. This supported the ‘ōpio to better themselves and their communication skills. Seeing healthy communication between male and female staff also demonstrated positive gender relationships. As such, case managers and staff were the largest influences for behavioral change and growth among the ‘ōpio.

Love was worked on through various dimensions, from self-love, romantic love, familial love, to community love. This was not approached as a sequential progression, however, as different ‘ōpio came in at different stages. The four dimensions simply represent the different ways in which Hale worked to develop the life skills related to love.

Self-Love

Systems-involved youth often struggle with a so-called ‘bad social identity’ (Lonkar, 2022). In other words, they struggle with the intense stigma and discrimination that comes from being without parents, being poor, homeless, sick, and not ‘abnormal’. Growing up with instability can damage their ability to love themselves in a healthy way, such as putting their own needs above the needs of others.

Although family is strongly rooted as a foundation of Hawaiian culture, the ‘ōpio were asked to come to Hale by themselves, without their families. Although couples were accepted, as well as two pairs of siblings (admitted separately), as much as possible, staff worked to untangle the sometimes harmful influences of the young person’s families, biological, foster, or adoptive. Such was the only way to get the young person to start working on themselves. ‘Ōpio have a great

capacity for love, but almost at a detriment to their own wellbeing. Many of them were observed sending money to their families or paying for friends' bills, even while drowning in their own debt.

Hekili, Alaula, Naupaka was a cultural-based group program that taught the sacred essence of kāne (man), wāhine (woman), and naupaka (mahu – two spirits). By helping the 'ōpio root themselves in their cultural identity, they would be able to find value in themselves, their family, and their community. Some of the questions the group posed for the youth included, 'whose child are you?', 'what place claims you?', and 'what will you strive for?' There was a separate kāne and wāhine group for participants to join, and each discussed the essence of each gender identity as rooted in Hawaiian culture.

In evaluation surveys, the 'ōpio gave positive feedback on how the group helped them find value in themselves. "I didn't know I could love myself," reflected one participant. Although it wasn't a selection criterion, all the 'ōpio at Hale had spent time in the foster care system at some point in their lives, which likely meant that they struggled with family relationships and having a stable support network. For those who did not have a place to call home, understanding and cultivating 'ōiwi or their Native Hawaiian cultural identity gave them a new place to call home by creating a spiritual connection with culture, place and 'āina. "The programs make me feel closer to my culture...it's a way to cleanse yourself and know your self-worth and how to keep yourself stronger," said one wahine. Another wahine reflected, "I wish I had this group when I was a kid to know how much I could love myself." By the end of the program, one kane said, "I can find peace much easier than before."

Romantic Love

The love that comes with romance may be the most conventional definition of 'love'. Yet for the 'ōpio at Hale, romance was not necessarily in the air. Couples were admitted together – a rarity in Hawai'i residential facilities – yet the stories of how they bonded were not roses and chocolates. There were over eight couples who came to Hale; most had young children (either from their partners or other partners). Common issues included lack of communication, physical and verbal violence, adultery; not to mention the individual struggles the young person had such as drug abuse, alcoholism, mental health issues, legal or court involvement, and so forth. Relationship Strengthening was thus one of the most needed services at Hale, although not all couples were willing to partake. Couples counseling, group programs, and staff modeling positive relationships and communication techniques were provided as ways for couples to work on their relationships. As many couples had a 'ride or die' mentality, the relationships often became barriers to self-growth.

It became quickly apparent that the ‘ōpio needed clarification on what was a healthy and unhealthy relationship. Many of them had bonded over trauma, which is a common way systems-involved individuals find partners. One couple met while living at a shelter prior to joining Hale. They soon had a child together that they loved, but as a couple they were unhealthily codependent and struggled with issues of adultery. Individually, they needed to work on self-love before they could be a healthy couple. The kane was struggling with legal battles and was on probation. He did reduce his substance abuse after moving into Hale and got at least three different jobs as he was unable to hold down a job. His efforts to clear his record was unfortunately rejected. The wahine was able to complete her assistant nursing certification and was able to stop her meth use. She was focusing on growing her capacity for a career pathway and her newborn. Both declined to work on relationship communication with one another. Although the two supported one another, they grew apart and eventually ended their relationship after moving out of Hale. This was one case where learning the life skills of self-love meant understanding how to maintain healthy boundaries and reexamining relationships. If the relationship was not pono (balance; right) then removing the toxic relationship and choosing to prioritize their own wellbeing was vital.

Staff provided individual, couple, and group counseling to help the ‘ōpio develop healthy intimate relationships. They coached the ‘ōpio on how to develop boundaries and detangle unhealthy codependency as the ‘ōpio often had limited experiences in mutually sustaining relationships. Having grown without permanency and often without healthy parental figures, they did not have a repertoire of lived experience to draw upon for their relationships. Another couple who came in together had never been on a date. Although they had been a couple for some time, they were living houseless in the bushes. The staff worked with them to organize a romantic home-cooked dinner date, complete with flowers and balloons – something the couple had never done or even experienced before. They were taught dining etiquette and how to care and be mindful of the other person. It was a unique experience that showed them the life skills of romantic love.

Interestingly, that same couple also went through a separation during their time at Hale. The kane, who struggled with anger management issues, damaged significant property during one of their altercations. It led to him being removed from Hale entirely for some time, although staff continued to work with him off-site. Being a low barrier program powered by aloha (love), the staff were able to meet the kane where he was at. The kane was able to move back into Hale after demonstrating his willingness to change. He was placed in a separate unit from the wahine to prevent more explosive and potentially dangerous situations. Yet the separation proved to be the exact thing the couple needed. As each of them worked on themselves and self-love, they found a deeper connection with one another. They continued to be a couple after they moved out of Hale,

and were still together based on a six-month follow-up interview. Teachable moments such as the ones this couple went through were not planned, but staff worked diligently to help each young person take a step forward.

The need for self-love and self-esteem is notably important in the life skills of romantic love. Many of the couples needed to work on themselves separately, and whether that ended the relationship or strengthened it is up to them. The staff at Hale focused on supporting the capacity for healthy love and executive functioning development (healthy relationships).

Familial Love

As discussed earlier, the ‘ōpio often came with entangled or unhealthy family and friend relationships. Family was not necessarily a place of refuge for them, whether the family was biological, foster, or adoptive. It was important for them to set healthier boundaries in order to put themselves first, and staff worked hard to make Hale a second family for the ‘ōpio.

The ‘ōpio were thus given the opportunity, space, and support to focus on their self-growth. The counseling services and case consultation they received at Hale helped them to work on boundary setting. The structured yet low-barrier nature of Hale allowed the ‘ōpio to negotiate their external relationships while falling back on staff to enforce rules and limits such as visits from external individuals. Even if the young person sometimes disagreed with the rules or had a difficult time working on themselves, consistent staff support, and coaching helped them to focus on their personal growth.

Building an ‘ohana-like community based on trust and care was an important aspect of the daily operations at Hale. The staff were dedicated and often went the extra mile to help the residents. Staff driving down in the middle of the night to deal with a problem or crisis was a common occurrence and truly showed to the ‘ōpio how dependable the staff were. This type of effort helped to build a deep sense of trust and rapport, thus creating a stable support system that many of the ‘ōpio did not have in their lives so far. The ‘ōpio described the staff as “older siblings” that they can solidly rely and depend on without worrying about being judged. Such was the sentiment which was reflected by many others who felt that Hale was a home to them. “They really do help everybody to their fullest extent and if they can’t help you, they know other people who can” said one ‘ōpio. “We can tell them anything. It’s confidential and safe,” said another in praise.

In an exit interview, one kāne reflected that “Hale is a major [part of my life]. I liked it, it was cool. A lot of fun.” He reflected that Hale was like being in high school. “Being around people around my age...Realizing that I’m not alone.” It was a revelation to him to see other youth in similar situations as him, struggling with similar challenges. This sentiment was echoed by another

young person in another exit interview, “I feel like we just all met each other for a reason. We are not all in the same boat but kind of on the same path, trying to be successful, and I love and appreciate everybody here. It makes me feel close to them because we’re all together.” For some, the long-lasting relationships developed were primary compared to their own family.

Yet as they learned how love was an important life skill, one particular young man was encouraged to make amends with his biological families with the help of one of the staff. The staff had been contracted to provide cultural programming for the ‘ōpio through working on his farm. He had a particularly strong impact on their growth. The staff was lauded across the board by all who took his class and were under his mentorship. His down to earth and culturally grounded approach to self-growth was well-liked. As movement was limited during the pandemic, it was a rare and unique opportunity to work on the ‘āina (land). The staff was elderly, and so the ‘ōpio enjoyed going to his farm to help him while learning cultural practices. They learned the reciprocal relationship between the land and the people - to take care of the ‘āina meant taking care of themselves.

One activity dubbed “Who is in your canoe?” helped the ‘ōpio understand their social support network through the metaphor of the canoe. The outrigger canoe is a traditional Hawaiian watersport, but its history dates back over two thousand years, as the canoe was necessary for the Hawaiian people to fish and find sustenance, as well as transport goods. It represented the connection the people had to the kai (ocean). In a typically six-person team, there are various roles, from the stroker who sets the pace for the canoe, the paddlers who work in tandem, and so forth. The activity “Who is in your canoe?” was designed to help the young person think through who the closest people in their lives are that they can trust to be on their canoe.

Under that staff’s mentorship, the young man wanted to reconcile with his biological family, including his father, brother, and grandmother. The young man had been in foster care and exploited by his foster family, which led him back to wanting to reconnect with his biological family. The staff helped mediate the process of ho‘oponopono, the traditional Hawaiian practice of healing and reconciliation (Chun, 2006). The young man was successfully able to reconcile with his father in particular, which was seen as a great moment of success for him by staff.

In a similar vein, another young woman also went through ho‘oponopono with her aunt and mother. The young woman had a child of her own, and not having family support proved difficult for her to navigate everyday challenges. After growing her independence and self-awareness in groups such as Hekili, Alaula, Naupaka, and learning more about healthy ways to love with boundaries in therapy, she acknowledged that she needed help mediating the conflicts with her family. After reconciliation through ho‘oponopono, she received strong support from her

mother in terms of childcare and her own pursuits. The positive familial support helped her thrive more; she was able to eventually save money to buy her own car and gain employment.

Community Love

During the year Hale was operational, the pandemic was at its full force. Quarantine, social distancing, and isolation was mandatory for the health and wellbeing of individuals, families, and communities. It was a time when people relied on their love and aloha for one another more than any other time in recent memory. The organization that sponsored Hale also engaged in community service, primarily in the form of food distribution for those in need. In partnership with other community organizations, thousands of boxes of food and groceries were distributed across the islands consistently throughout 2020. It was an opportune time for the ‘ōpio of Hale to engage with community love and perpetuate aloha, sending it out into the universe even if aloha may not be returned.

It took some time for the ‘ōpio to get used to a daily routine, particularly when quarantine regulations were changing almost daily during that period of time. But participating in food distribution was one regular activity they could look forward to. Staff noted signs of growth among the ‘ōpio as they shifted from not being very active to engaging regularly. One young man had a particularly turning point while volunteering one day. A homeless aunty who was in line for a food box thanked and praised him for his work. The young man had just been homeless months before coming to live at Hale. It was the first time in a long while that he was able to give back to another person and feel valued.

At another food distribution session, that same young man was tempted by old friends to do crystal meth. In addition to being homeless, he also previously struggled with a meth addiction. Yet, while volunteering for the community, he somehow was able to reject the proposal. He later told staff about it with pride at his ability to say no, which boosted his self-confidence significantly. His self-esteem grew significantly from engaging in acts of love for his community.

Conclusion

When the ‘ōpio first joined Hale, their life trajectories could be described as less than optimal. They had been rendered houseless or unemployed due to the pandemic, had prior involvement with the Child Welfare System, and experienced trauma, among other life challenges. Yet, and more importantly, they all possessed the incredible power of hope and resilience to transform their lives and make a better future for themselves. The staff of Hale, joined them on

their journey, providing a non-judgmental and loving approach. They created strong, ‘ohana-like relationships with the ‘ōpio and reinforced the life skill of love through aloha.

Love was taught as a life skill in many ways, be it with the self, with romantic partners, with family, or with community. Focusing on self-love oftentimes opened up the path to healthier love for their partners and their families. As the ‘ōpio learned how to set boundaries to put their own wellbeing first, some found that they needed to let go of some relationships while others felt ready to reconcile with past broken relationships. Finding love in giving back to the community opened their eyes to their self-value, resulting in empowerment and increased self-confidence. What staff observed was that each ‘ōpio had a great capacity for love, and each found their own way to love.

While there were many challenges along the way, in the end, all ‘ōpio successfully transitioned from Hale to short-term or long-term housing with a deeper understanding of what it means to love themselves, their partners, their family, and their community.

Appendix

Glossary of Hawaiian Words

- Aloha aku, aloha mai – When love is given, love is received.
- ‘Ōlelo no‘eau – traditional Hawaiian proverbs
- ‘Ōpio – youth or young adult
- Pilina – mutually sustaining relationships
- ‘Ōiwi – native intelligence; cultural identity
- Hale – home
- ‘Ohana – family
- Kuleana – responsibility
- Pu‘uhonua – sacred place of refuge
- Aloha ‘āina – compassion for that which sustains life (land, sea, water)
- Wahi pana – sacred or pulsating places
- Hekili – essence of man
- Alaula – essence of woman
- Naupaka – essence of two spirits
- Kāne – men
- Wāhine – women

- Mahu – two spirits
- ‘Āina – land
- Pono – right, just, balance
- Kai – ocean
- Ho‘oponopono – traditional Hawaiian practice of healing and reconciliation

References

- Benbenishty, R., & Zeira, A. (2012). *On the Verge of Leaving the Care System: Assessment of Life Skills and Needs of Adolescents in Care*.
- Blakeborough, D., Gibson, K., & Robson, J. (2014). *Homelessness and Low-Barrier Housing in Chilliwack: A Qualitative Research Report* (p. 46). Chilliwack Social Research and Planning Council.
- Carrera, P., Jiménez-Morago, J. M., Román, M., & León, E. (2019). Caregiver ratings of executive functions among foster children in middle childhood: Associations with early adversity and school adjustment. *Children and Youth Services Review, 106*, 104495. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.104495>
- Chun, M. N. (2006). *Ho‘oponopono: Traditional ways of healing to make things right again*. Curriculum Research & Development Group, University of Hawai‘i.
- City of Portland. (2013). *What We Mean by Low Barrier*. <https://www.portlandmaine.gov/DocumentCenter/View/2286/Intro-to-Low-Barrier>
- Cutuli, J. J., Goerge, R. M., Coulton, C., Schretzman, M., Crampton, D., Charvat, B. J., Lalich, N., Raithel, Jessica A., Gacitua, C., & Lee, E. L. (2016). From foster care to juvenile justice: Exploring characteristics of youth in three cities. *Children and Youth Services Review, 67*, 84–94. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2016.06.001>
- Evans, J. (2011). Exploring the (bio)political dimensions of voluntarism and care in the city: The case of a ‘low barrier’ emergency shelter. *Health & Place, 17*(1), 24–32. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2010.05.001>
- Forenza, B., Bermea, A., & Rogers, B. (2018). Ideals and Reality: Perceptions of Healthy and Unhealthy Relationships Among Foster Youth. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal, 35*(3), 221–230. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-017-0523-3>
- Fry, C. E., Langley, K., & Shelton, K. H. (2017). A systematic review of cognitive functioning among young people who have experienced homelessness, foster care, or poverty. *Child Neuropsychology, 23*(8), 907–934. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09297049.2016.1207758>
- Giffords, E. D., Alonso, C., & Bell, R. (2007). A Transitional Living Program for Homeless Adolescents: A Case Study. *Child Youth Care Forum, 36*, 141–151.
- Hofschneider, A. (2022, December 12). *Racial Disparities Vex Hawai‘i’s Child Welfare System. Can They Be Fixed?* Honolulu Civil Beat. <https://www.civilbeat.org/2022/12/racial-disparities-vex-hawaii-child-welfare-system-can-they-be-fixed/>
- Kamehameha Schools. (2021). *Ka Huakai‘i: 2021 Native Hawaiian Educational Assessment*. Kamehameha Publishing. https://issuu.com/kamehamehaschools/docs/ka_huakai_2014
- Lausten, M., & Frederiksen, S. (2016). Do you love me? An empirical analysis of the feeling of love amongst children in out-of-home care. *International Journal of Social Pedagogy*. <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.ijsp.2017.07>

- Lili'uokalani Trust. (2022). *Native Hawaiian Wellbeing Update*. Lili'uokalani Trust. https://qlt-trust.cdn.prismic.io/qlt-trust/9ad04bd6-7a5f-4ec7-bb5f-76bd025e272d_2022+NH+Wellbeing+Update.pdf
- Lonkar, B. D. (2022). *Aged Out Fosters: A Qualitative Descriptive Study of Attachment and Well-Being*.
- Martin-Grissom, D. A. (n.d.). *Foster care adolescents: Examining perceptions of a model resiliency and life-skills training program*.
- National Park Service. (2017). *Foundation Document Overview: Pu'uhoonua o Hōnaunau National Historical Park* (Foundation Document). U.S. Department of the Interior. <http://npshistory.com/publications/foundation-documents/puho-fd-2017.pdf>
- Nnawulezi, N., Godsay, S., Sullivan, C. M., Marcus, S., & HacsKaylo, M. (2018). The influence of low-barrier and voluntary service policies on survivor empowerment in a domestic violence housing organization. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 88(6), 670–680.
- Office of Hawaiian Affairs. (2010). *The Disparate Treatment of Native Hawaiians in the Criminal Justice System*. https://19of32x2yl33s8o4xza0gf14-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/ir_final_web_rev.pdf
- Olson, A., Scherer, D. G., & Cohen, A. L. (2017). Decision-making skills of emerging adults aging out of foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 82, 81–86. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.09.023>
- Pedersen, E. R., Tucker, J. S., & Kovalchik, S. A. (2016). Facilitators and Barriers of Drop-In Center Use Among Homeless Youth. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 59(2), 144–153. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2016.03.035>
- Perez, B. R., Jan. 10, 2016, tab, O. in a new, tab, O. in a new, tab, O. in a new, & tab, O. in a new. (2016, January 10). *Hawaiians at risk: Keiki locked in cycle of foster care system*. Honolulu Star-Advertiser. <https://www.staradvertiser.com/2016/01/10/hawaii-news/special-report-hawaiians-at-risk-keiki-locked-in-cycle-of-foster-care-system/>
- Shah, M. F., Liu, Q., Mark Eddy, J., Barkan, S., Marshall, D., Mancuso, D., Lucenko, B., & Huber, A. (2017). Predicting Homelessness among Emerging Adults Aging Out of Foster Care. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 60(1–2), 33–43. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12098>
- State of Hawai'i Department of Human Services. (2019). *Hawai'i Data Booklet 2015–2019: ASPR Final Report FFY 2020 & Child and Family Service Plan 2020-2024*. Social Services Division.
- Tucker, J. S., Pedersen, E. R., Parast, L., & Klein, D. J. (2018). Factors associated with drop-in center utilization among unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 91, 347–354. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.06.027>