

## **Testimony of Luana Kawelu, Director of the Merrie Monarch Festival – June 2, 2022**

### **The Merrie Monarch Festival's Role in Supporting Hula**

The beginnings of the festival did not include an emphasis on the art of hula. It was actually an attempt by the Hawai'i County Executive Officer, what we now call the Mayor, to revitalize Hawai'i Island's struggling economy. In the 1960s the island was still recovering from a devastating tsunami as well as the declining sugar industry. The first 5 years of the festival were organized by various island chambers of commerce including the Hawai'i Island Chamber of Commerce and centered around the pageantry of the Hawaiian monarchy, and the life of our last reigning king, David La'amea Kalākaua. Activities like a coronation pageant, a King Kalākaua beard look-alike contest, barbershop quartet contest, a relay race, and Holokū Ball were part of these early years of the Festival.

In 1968, declining interest from the public and the lack of a chairperson from the chamber of commerce set the festival on a different path, one that sought to replicate the work of Kalākaua by gathering the best hālau hula from around the islands, showcasing Hawaiian arts and artisans, and ultimately celebrating a thriving and resilient Hawaiian people.

Today, 59 years after the Festival's inception, we hold fast to the goals set forth by our kupuna so many years ago. In 1971, encouraged by the hula masters of the day, the Festival held a hula competition featuring 9 wahine hālau. 5 years later men were invited to join the competition, and from that point the interest and excitement around the festival grew. Today, we showcase up to 25 hālau over 3 days of competition, providing a platform on which today's kumu hula, who held tight to the teachings of their kumu, can showcase their generational knowledge. Many more hālau await their opportunity to share their hula traditions on the Merrie Monarch Stage.

However, the hula competition is just one facet of the week-long Festival, which includes a free all-day Ho'olaule'a presenting hula and music, mid-day hula performances at the local hotels, a 4-day Hawaiian arts and crafts fair, and one of the longest parades in the islands. All of these activities serve to perpetuate a multitude of Hawaiian cultural practices, like hula, chanting, language, music, cooking, lei making, weaving, carving, and pā'ū riding

### **The Festival's Role in Sharing Hawaiian Culture Beyond Hawai'i**

The mission of the Merrie Monarch Festival is to perpetuate, preserve, and promote the art of hula and the Hawaiian culture. We endeavor to develop and augment a living knowledge of Hawaiian culture, arts, and crafts through workshops, demonstrations, exhibitions, and performances of the highest quality and authenticity. In doing so, we seek to enrich the lives of all of Hawai'i's people, and beyond, including individuals who might not otherwise have an opportunity to participate in the culture.

For example, the global reach of the Festival is reflected in our social media presence in 146 countries around the world, including 8 countries in Africa, Syria, Iraq, Japan, Canada, Mexico, Germany, New Zealand, and Australia. The broadcast extends the reach from approximately 6,000 in-stadium attendees each night to over 750,000 additional Hawai'i viewers on the TV broadcast plus online users, generating over 30,000,000 impressions.

## **The Festival's Role in Supporting Local Artists and Designers Through Our Invitational Arts & Crafts Fair**

The 4-day long invitational fair featuring Hawaiian arts and crafts is a huge draw in and of itself. Some people travel to Hilo specifically to shop at our craft fair, some come as far away as California. Some Hawai'i residents will travel to Hilo for the day, to come and take advantage of the opportunity to buy authentic Hawaiian art at our fair. The fashion industry in Hawai'i is booming, and the businesses of several of these designers were amplified by their participation in our fair, as it is a major venue that draws thousands of people to Hilo each year. We strive to present only authentic Hawaiian cultural art and products, made by the artists themselves, and vet their work before we invite them into the fair. This means that our local businesses benefit from their hard work, and the economy in Hawai'i benefits in turn.

The increase in visitors to Hilo during the festival week has also created an opportunity for other Hilo organizations and businesses to take advantage of the opportunity to attract patrons as well. Craft fairs, music concerts, and food vendors pop up in Hilo during the week of Merrie Monarch, creating further opportunities for local artists, businesses, and organizations.

## **The Festival's Greatest Successes and Challenges Over the last 59 Years**

Our longevity is one of our successes. We have only canceled the festival once in our 59 year history, and that was for health and safety reasons in 2020 due to the COVID pandemic. Otherwise we have continuously held the event every year since 1963. This longevity is due in large part to the support of the hula community. Every year two-dozen or so hālau make the commitment to come to Hilo to participate in the hula competition, investing their time, energy, knowledge, and resources to the endeavor. Their sacrifice, and the desire of other hālau to participate in the festival, ensures the continuation of this event.

Part of the reason the hālau want to come back to the festival each year is because of our commitment to perpetuating the traditions of hula, and our support of Hawaiian culture and our community as a whole. We see this as one of our biggest successes, providing a place for cultural practitioners to showcase our living culture and the depth of knowledge that still exists in our community.

Upholding our Hawaiian values and traditions is also one of our greatest challenges today. The temptation to relax some of our traditions and rules, to cater to the changing whims of the times is something that the hula experts who helped to establish the Merrie Monarch Festival warned against. They cautioned us to hold fast to those practices and teachings of our elders, and to ensure that we don't stray from the path that was set before us.