

By the Roots

When weeding out a garden, one cannot simply pluck the leaves off a weed. One must pull the weed out by its roots. Although this may seem obvious, the state of Hawaii has struggled to address the root of another problem for years: the inequalities and inefficiencies of our healthcare system. For decades, Hawaii has prided itself on its healthcare. The Prepaid Health Care Act helped us enjoy high coverage rates--until the pandemic hit. It is no coincidence that, as unemployment rose, the uninsurance rate also climbed. COVID-19 has revealed the way government policy has only treated the symptoms of a greater issue without addressing the cause.

Seeing so many in my community lose their health insurance in the midst of a pandemic inspired me to search for permanent reform that would keep people from enduring the same problem again. In an effort to understand the deficiencies within our healthcare system, I became an intern for the Americans for Democratic Action over the summer. I researched healthcare throughout the country and around the world, attended virtual town hall meetings, and listened to local representatives and experts discuss their ideas for change. At the end of the summer, I submitted an extensive report on my findings and suggested the best reforms for which the organization could advocate in the coming year.

I learned about the way the rising cost of premiums puts an increasing amount of pressure on Hawaii families; high costs hindered access to care long before COVID-19 existed. In addition, our complex, multi-payer insurance system creates unnecessary administrative costs that waste consumers' money and burden Hawaii's physicians. These issues have been lurking beneath the surface for years.

Being faced with an unprecedented health crisis has provided Hawaii with the opportunity to solve these problems in the present day. In my report, I detailed the way the state could save \$500 million annually by creating a self-insurance system for all state employees, similar to the successful self-funded model in Utah. I also illustrated the way Maryland's all-payer model has solved both problems with access and inefficiency. By simplifying their multi-payer insurance system, Maryland hospitals have created a highly affordable model while decreasing administrative costs. These measures have helped improve the health of the state overall, and similar results could be seen in Hawaii should we enact the same measures.

As bleak as the future may seem, the best possible takeaway from COVID-19 is lasting reform. Learning about the successes and failures of our current policy and searching for ways to improve not only provides us with the power to bring change, but it also fulfills our civic duty as Americans. Although I am only one person, the time I spent over the summer pushing for change was time well spent. I have contributed to a larger conversation that, hopefully, will encourage policymakers to address the root of the problem and create a better future for our islands.

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An Unexpected Lesson to Remember

“Please . . . please bear with me sir,” her frail voice trembled through the phone. I set my mask to the side and scooted closer to my desk. Hearing the pain and desperation in her voice, I knew this would be no ordinary conversation.

COVID-19 kept me cooped up indoors for the majority of my summer, and upon seeing an advertisement on my church website asking for volunteers, I felt purpose and excitement fill my body. The motto, “doing the most good,” resounded in my head as I drove myself to the Salvation Army site early that morning.

Due to the global effects that COVID-19 created, many people were left unemployed and some even homeless. As a result, countless people called the Salvation Army hotline, leaving a voicemail and asking for assistance. A kind woman named Sarah instructed me to return those voicemails and ensure they qualified for their requested aid. Sarah handed me a thick stack of papers filled with names like a phone book. I dialed a number and a weak voice answering my call squeezed out a response, “H—hello, who is this?”

“Hi ma’am, this is Valor with the Salvation Army, returning your call about financial assistance . . .”

“Oh, th—th—thank y—you sir,” she said. Her stuttering immediately melted ~~Explaining~~ that she was in a care home with Alzheimer’s, she was

requesting financial assistance for her situation. Thinking of my sweet grandma who underwent surgery after a recent unfortunate incident, my heart was immediately stolen by this lady. Snatching my pen from the table and grabbing a new form, I was determined to help her like a marathon runner determined to finish his last mile. “I will do what I can ma’am,” I assured her.

Throughout the call, I could hear her desperately scrambling in the background to find her records of information. She would leave me in silent anticipation for a few minutes and then return with a hopeful voice when she finally found the needed information. Apologizing for the wait, she pleaded with me, “P—please sir, s—stay with me.”

Realizing that helping others goes beyond just filling out their form, I sunk right back into my chair, planted my feet and turned up the volume on my phone to hear her more clearly. As she struggled to articulate her words, she explained that she was involved in an accident in which a van blind-sided her on the way to a food bank, which left her immobile. As a result, she sought the help of local organizations, such as the Salvation Army. One hour later, I found myself on the verge of tears.

That summer day, I felt deeply humbled, and my eyes were opened to this fact: everyone has a story, and some just need a listening ear.

The COVID Resistance in Defense of Teaching and Learning

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Community is one of those words that are too difficult to define. Though, I'd say that community can be seen and felt like an ohana, whether it be your neighborhood or your culture. I am blessed to serve and be a part of many communities such as the *Filipino community*, *Waipahu High School*, and *Future Farmers of America*, which is a club at our school. I have always valued the ability and willingness to learn. An opportunity to do so is at school. Everyone should have access to education. However, with our given circumstances, a lot of students and educators worldwide do not have adequate resources to carry out distance learning. Others do have resources but not enough guidance to utilize the applications on their gadget.

I've initiated a fundraiser to ensure that children in my hometown, *Bacarra, Ilocos Norte, Philippines* have access to a stable WiFi connection and a gadget to learn during this pandemic. The country does not have as many resources compared to the United States. Therefore, my goal is to raise \$4000 to help over 200 families. I am starting with one area of *Bacarra* with these following stages: (1) implement five antennas to relay signal to outlying areas along with providing accompanying equipments such as routers (2) pre-pay an annual subscription fee for the WiFi provider (3) purchase an x amount of device with leftover money (4) establish a security system to protect the technologies. As of today, I raised \$1000 with the help of friends, families, West Pearl Harbor Rotary Club, and the Knights of Rizal. I hope to reach my goal before the students and educators start the new school year on October 5, 2020.

In Hawaii, my main objective is to provide support and guidance to those that are doing distance learning, including my peers at Waipahu High School. This summer, I helped to create and post short video tutorials on Google Suite applications on our class account as a council member. I am also planning to use my platforms to share online school tips and useful resources like video links for each subject.

All in all, the importance of education was my drive to serve the communities. A study called *Double Jeopardy: How Third Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation*, showed that one in six children who are not reading proficiently in third grade fail to graduate high school on time. Hence, if we miss educating students for one whole year, it can cause catastrophic ripples in a decade or more. I hope to continue to unfold my plans and help to make the communities a better place day by day.

Work Cited

Hernandez, Donald J. "How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation." Annie E. Casey , 2012.

Kaitlin Kitagawa
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Standing Together, Six Feet Apart

The year 2020 was nothing like we expected. Early in the year America faced wildfires, tornadoes, and deadly floods. Little did we know that the biggest threat was yet to come. In March, COVID-19 spread far and wide through the United States, making it the epicenter of the world's pandemic. Our lives slowed down and stopped.

This was certainly the case in my little world in Pukalani, Maui. All my plans for school and summer came to a screeching halt. There would be no Jazz Camp, Science Olympiad competition, or volunteering through my Interact and 4-H clubs. Eager to get out of the house, I decided to help my parents in the only activity they were willing to leave the safety of our house for--to help with local community food distribution events.

During the months of June and July, I took part in two of Representative Kyle Yamashita's food distribution events. I joined masked (and shielded) teachers, politicians, community activists, and students like me in cleaning, sorting, and packing hundreds of pounds of donated local produce such as green onions and purple sweet potatoes. The produce was divided into packages to be given to individuals in Upcountry Maui, and into boxes for local organizations serving people in need, such as Kula Hospital. I was shocked that we had to prepare hundreds of bags. To think that each bag represented a home that needed food opened my eyes to the importance of people coming together as a team to support its community members. It also reminded me that even though I was still a teenager, I could contribute to make my community better. One way I did that directly was to prepare food packets. Indirectly,

I

learned about the legislative process and elections, and why it is important for me to pay attention to what our representatives do and say. These people are our voices in the city, state, and federal governments, so it is my responsibility as a citizen to keep myself informed about the issues that affect me and my community, and support those representatives and causes that I believe will best represent my beliefs, values, and ideas.

While helping Kyle Yamashita with his food distributions, I asked a lot of questions about his campaign and those of his competitor. I finally understood why my parents closely read candidate flyers, and obsessively watched debates and the voting results during each election. Now that I understand the basics of politics and that my vote does make a difference, I cannot wait to vote! With my new knowledge, I want to teach my younger relatives, friends, and classmates about these processes, spreading the knowledge, and motivating people in my community to vote.

My summer was restricted much more than in past years, but I still found ways to positively contribute to my community from a safe distance. Although times are tough, there are still ways to serve as a contributing, informed, and masked member of the community.

**“Standing Together, Six Feet Apart:
How Did You Serve the Community During the COVID-19 Pandemic?”**

**Essay by Kai Mottley
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COVID-19 and the necessary lockdown swept over the world and my community like a tsunami. Like everyone else, I had to figure out my role in the “new normal” of a pandemic. I learned to wear a mask and practiced social distancing. However, I could not escape hearing about all the deaths in New York and Italy. What also affected me was the emotional toll of the pandemic and learning that three young Kauai men committed suicide. I wanted to help but wasn't sure what I could do as a teenager with no medical training.

I soon heard about the urgent need for face shields. Fortunately I had a 3D-printer and computer aided design (CAD) skills from classes at the Kauai Community College and Kauai High. I reached out to Kauai Makerspace to offer assistance. The founder, Richard O'Reilly, immediately asked if I could run 4 of his printers to help fulfill a face shield order from Hawaii Pacific Health and its hospitals.

I gave this work my full attention for the next few months. I turned my garage into a factory producing face shields one after another. This meant checking the equipment, replacing filament, troubleshooting, and creating a printing schedule since each shield took approximately 5 hours to print. The printers buzzed from 6am to midnight. They printed in two parts that would fit over the forehead. In other hands, a headband would be added, and the plastic shield itself would be snapped between the two parts. It felt good to envision these shields on the faces of our doctors and nurses, protecting them from COVID-19.

Kauai Makerspace and other groups were able to fulfill the order for face shields. I was grateful to be part of the effort. In closing, this taught me that when an unexpected disaster strikes, anyone can contribute by using their creativity and skills. I learned the value of serving my community through action - no matter how minor that action seems. Just like "Rosie the Riveteer" during World War II, you don't have to be a fighter on the frontline to make a difference. Printing face shields showed me that when we all contribute to a greater cause, our community can overcome anything, including a pandemic.

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Standing Together

Late into the summer, without anything to do, my mother found that volunteers were needed at my local university's kitchen. I accepted without a second thought, ready to serve my community to the best of my abilities. Ever since quarantine began, they had become overwhelmingly shorthanded and they needed volunteers for delivering food to the students who were trapped in quarantine. Their current worker count was a *quarter* of what it regularly is. I applied and was immediately accepted, despite the age gap, and my inexperience doing physical labor. My supervisor looked beyond these physical restraints that were holding me back and helped my rise to the level of the other volunteers there, providing me with the knowledge that is only granted through raw experience.

Upon arriving there on my first day, I was whisked into a flurry of jobs. I was everywhere at all times, packing lunches into boxes, chopping fruits, and running appliances to the dish pit. While this was happening the other dozen volunteers were tending to hot ovens, tossing salads, and manning woks. And despite the ache of my muscles and the layers of sweat under my mask, I always responded with a yes and a smile. Working there allowed me to realize that I was contributing to something greater than myself. Simply bearing the knowledge that I was providing meals to people who were locked in quarantine, making their lives just *that* much better, was far more satisfying, far more fulfilling than I would have ever anticipated. Even though I was volunteering and gained no material benefits, I was warmed to know how much of an impact I was creating in my community and that the lunches would likely not have been served without my help and the other volunteers. I was the person who was regularly pinned with

the job of sweeping, mopping, and wiping down tables. Though my contribution to the kitchen was not as large as the chefs, I knew I was making their jobs exponentially easier, allowing them more time to focus on the delicate parts of cooking balanced meals for hundreds of people.

On my last day, while I was bidding my farewells to my supervisors, I could tell that the smiles on their faces were genuine. During that last moment, I learned that they did not think of me as another slacking kid who only gave their hours and left immediately thereafter, but someone willing to go the extra mile working in their close-knit community and give his all 100% of the time.

Working there was truly an eye-opening experience to see what togetherness looked like in nearly its purest form. I was confounded by how well the final result of each day turned out when we had to rely on each other so much. It put into perspective how much people can get done if they simply work together as one body.