Aunty Alama: Lessons in the Value of Kūpuna

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I heard many stories about the mean and strict science teacher at Waiheʻe Elementary School. Miss Ayers would whack her students with a yardstick if they did not listen, shame them in front of the whole class, and pick on them if she knew they were not paying attention. But no matter how hard she was on her students, she was remembered as a great teacher. Her former students have come up to me over the years, surprised to find out that Miss Ayers was my great-aunt. The stories they told me seemed unbelievable, because I never encountered such discipline with her. But her passion for education was something that all of us remembered.

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To me, Miss Ayers was Aunty Alama. Aunty Alama was an old, tall, Hawaiian-Chinese lady with a hunched back, who always wore a muʻumuʻu. She was also my neighbor. She was born and raised in the small town of Waiheʻe on the island of Maui. My aunt was a well-educated wahine who graduated from Kamehameha Schools for Girls in 1942. She obtained her bachelor's degree from Brigham Young University in Utah and earned her master's degree from Columbia University in New York. She also spent some time at Oxford University in England. She loved her home and wanted to give back by becoming a teacher.

Growing up, Aunty Alama would come over to my house about three or four times a week to visit my papa. She would either come early in the morning or late in the afternoon. When she was at my house, I had to be on my best behavior because she would always tell me what I did wrong. From a very young age, I could always remember hearing Aunty Alama walking to my house. She dragged her slippers on the asphalt as she walked on the side of the road. I assumed that her hunched back made her drag her feet. No matter where you were in the house—in the front parlor or in the back bedroom—you could always hear her slippers dragging. And if you couldn't hear her slippers, you could definitely hear her yell, "Manaku! I'm coming!"

Manaku was my papa and her older brother. As a child, hearing my aunt's feet and her yelling as she made her slow descent to my house made me laugh. I thought it was so funny to hear this old lady, who was going deaf, yell at another old man, who was also going deaf. You could just tell these two were related. As she walked through the front door, she would yell for my papa, and these two buggahs would be screaming at each other. Not with anger, but because they could hardly hear each other.

"HI MANAKU!" my aunt would yell.

"WHAT?" my papa would yell back, as he tried to understand what she said.

"HUH?" she would reply.

Eventually they would carry on with their conversation, both acting like they could hear each other. Their conversation would meander all over the place, since they couldn't actually hear what the other was saying. But you could see that they enjoyed each other's company. Before my aunty would leave my house, she would be nīele and look in all the rooms. I would usually be on the computer, and she would always yell, "Eh, no sit close to da TV! You goin go blind. You like see or wat?" I would just laugh because she didn't know what a computer was. As she made her way out the door, she would yell, "Bye Manaku! Love you!" You knew she was home when you couldn't hear her slippers dragging anymore. I hold these memories close to me because as I got older, our lives changed drastically.

When I became a freshman in high school, I decided to board at Lāhaināluna High School. My papa and my two uncles had attended Lāhaināluna and boarded when it was an all-boys school, and I thought it was time for me to be independent and board as well. During my first three years at Lāhaināluna, there were many changes

happening at home. We lost our family property. Six generations had been on that land, and it was devastating to no longer be part of that place. Aunty Alama would point to her chest and tell me, "My mother built that house, and me and Manaku grew up in it." Since I was boarding in Lāhainā during this transition, I wasn't able to see the pain that my mom and her brothers were going through. Our family was very small, and to have something so precious taken was heartbreaking. My aunt was silent during this time, but she was not angry. Although her family home was taken from her, it still stood there, holding all of her memories.

Aunty Alama at this time was getting old and needed more care since she lived on her own and did not drive. And because we didn't have a home anymore, my mom asked Aunty Alama if we could move in with her. She agreed, and my mom and sister moved in. Toward the end of my senior year, I got a life-changing call from my mother. She told me that Aunty Alama had fallen and broken her leg. My aunt's leg was in a cast and she could no longer walk. This was a difficult time for my mother. She lost her job as a result of caring for Aunty Alama, and she now relied on unemployment to help with the bills and food. When I graduated from high school, I moved back home. I saw the stress my mom was going through, trying to care for me and my sister, losing her job, and caregiving for Aunty Alama. It was then that I decided to take on this kuleana and became my aunt's full-time caregiver.

Caregiving was difficult, both physically and mentally. I couldn't imagine how Aunty Alama must have felt not being able-bodied anymore. During this time, my aunty and I spent a lot of time together, learning from each other. Even though she had dementia, we were able to have many conversations. However, the conversations were mostly short phrases, all jumbled up. She would always start off by proudly shouting, "I from Waiheʻe. Ayers is my name." And she would continue on about who her family was. She would go on and on, eventually telling me stories about growing up in Waiheʻe and attending Kamehameha. She would also tell me bits and pieces about her life as a teacher. I enjoyed listening, and as she opened up to me, we slowly created a bond.

While my aunt would rest, I would clean her room. I found many treasures in her drawers and closet. I found maps of the old Waiheʻe plantation town, old pictures of buildings like the old Waiheʻe Dairy, historical documents about Hawaiʻi, and even information about the Hawaiian Kingdom. Some documents were written by my aunt as well. There were also old newspaper articles about how involved my aunt had been within the Waiheʻe community and with other communities. It was amazing!

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One day, I told my mom what I had found in her room, and she told me that Aunty Alama had been a historian at the Bailey House Museum, so it wasn't a surprise for my mom to hear about these types of documents lying around the house. I was filled with awe, learning all this about the person I was caring for. My aunt, who had given so much of her time and knowledge to the people of Waiheʻe, was truly an inspiration.

On days when I was absent from her care, Aunty Alama would ask my mom where I was and when I was coming back. She could never pronounce my name, so she would ask, "Where the girl?" Other times, she would refuse to eat or drink unless I was there. I remember one day, I was doing a project for school, and I asked my mom to care for Aunty. As my mom was trying to feed her, all I heard was grumbling from the two of them. Then I heard a yell, "Kawehi! Come here." I went to my aunt's room and found her putting her hand over her mouth. She refused to eat what my mom was giving her. I gave Aunty Alama "the stare," and she looked down and slowly opened her mouth. My mom just laughed and couldn't believe the type of bond that had grown between Aunty Alama and me.

I cared for Aunty Alama for almost five years. Caring for her was the most difficult time in my life. I learned so much about caregiving and how it affects families. There were days when I felt alone, stressed, and depressed. But my aunt had taught me to always love and to always have patience.

If it was not for my Aunty Alama, I would not be where I am today. I graduated from the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa and am now working toward a master's degree. The experience of being my aunt's caregiver opened my eyes. I now do things not for myself, but for the next generation, while also remembering what our kūpuna have taught us. Looking back on the life of my aunty, the stories I was told about her were true. She was mean and strict. But she was a great teacher. I would not have become the person I am today without her.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kawehi Kina is a Kanaka 'Ōiwi Hawai'i from Waihe'e on the island of Maui. She is a master's student in the Department of Educational Administration at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. Her time as a caregiver for her great aunt, Alama Ayers, inspired her to pursue higher education.