



Dean and Michele Wilhelm are
nurturing community in the old Hawaiian way —
by growing kalo

KNEE-DEEP IN ALOHA

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Early on a Saturday morning, I pull off the busy Pali Highway and drive through the Maunawili subdivision to Kapalai Farms. I’m here to participate in a community workday at a lo’i kalo—an irrigated taro farm—at the edge of a residential neighborhood. It’s an unlikely place for a taro farm, and the married couple who run it, Dean and Michele Wilhelm, are unlikely farmers. “Our whole desire was never to become taro farmers,” Dean tells the work group that has gathered. This surprises me. Behind us, after all, is the Wilhelms’ two-acre lo’i, where neat rows of kalo sprout from raised mounds surrounded by channels of chocolate-colored water. The kalo’s distinctive heart-shaped leaves look almost joyful, dancing and glistening in the soft morning sun. For reluctant farmers, Dean and Michele have nonetheless managed to create a picture-perfect taro farm.

But that’s not all they’ve made; there’s a bigger project at work here, one that I piece together over the course of two mornings at their property. The Wilhelms, it turns out, both are and aren’t taro farmers,

and their lo’i produces kalo, yes, but it also does much more.

“I encourage all of us to step out of our comfort zone and meet somebody new you don’t know and see where it goes from there,” Dean exhorts the group of about two dozen people. At 6’2”, Dean has a commanding presence, with a direct gaze that is simultaneously kind and no-nonsense. As a group we take his encouragement to heart, exchanging high fives and making small talk as we walk to the lo’i. Dean looks on, smiling. This simple act of greeting and mingling is all part of the bigger project. Dean and Michele might not have set out to be taro farmers, but they did set out to build a community. “Community is based on relationships, as I see it,” Dean tells me. “We’re offering people an opportunity to come here and develop a relationship with the land, with other people and with ke Akua (God).”

Through their nonprofit organization Hookuaaina, the Wilhelms organize regular community workdays like the one I am attending. But their main project is a mentoring program for youth, many of whom have had bad breaks in life. The program

helps troubled teenagers improve their decision-making skills, strengthen their cultural identity (which is frequently but not always Native Hawaiian), improve their sense of self-worth and enhance their capacity to contribute to society. The program combines work, fun, introspection and counseling, and the lo’i is where it all comes together.

The workers here today include first-time volunteers, paid interns and participants in the mentoring program. The mentees include eight residents of Ke Kama Pono Safe House, a residential facility for young men dealing with substance abuse, gang involvement, unstable homes and other challenges. These teenagers are familiar with the lo’i and the work routine, leaping enthusiastically into the ‘auwai, the channel of water that surrounds the mounds. All except one, that is. “I don’t like mud,” he tells me, and his friends laugh and tease him.

At first I share his anxiety about the mud. This lo’i is fed by a spring that burbles up out of the ground. It is deeper and muddier than the more common stream-fed lo’i are. I step in tentatively and feel a moment of



Hidden near the entrance to a residential subdivision on Windward O’ahu, Kapalai Farms features two acres of lo’i kalo, or irrigated taro patches (seen above). The lo’i are spring-fed, making them deeper and muddier than Hawai’i’s more common stream-fed lo’i. The operation is so low-keyed that many neighbors have no idea it’s there. On the opening spread, Kapalai Farms intern Zachary Piliien harvests kalo.

panic as the murky water rises to my hips and my feet are sucked ankle-deep into the muddy bottom. But once I find my balance, I begin to appreciate the experience. The water is cool but not cold, and the mud squishes pleasantly between my toes.

A 16-year-old Hawaiian boy named Kamu sees me struggling to get out again and points helpfully to a spot where it's easier to clamber onto the slippery embankment. Kamu has been working at this lo'i for about six months and clearly enjoys being here. He tells me that he appreciates the traditional cultural practices he learns through the program. Hookuaaina emphasizes Hawaiian values such as laulima, which Dean explains to mean "many hands working together can accomplish much." When he has the group assembled, he invokes another Hawaiian proverb—He wa'a he moku, he moku he wa'a (The canoe is an island, the island is a canoe)—to talk about self-sufficiency and resourcefulness. He also uses it as a metaphor for everyday life, inviting each of us to contemplate whether the canoe of our life is headed in the right direction.

Kamu tells me he values these lessons,



Kapalai Farms' founders Michele and Dean Wilhelm, seen above, did not intend to become farmers. Their goal was to create a youth mentoring program. They ended up doing both, using Hawaiian methods of cultivating kalo to help young people develop life skills. On the facing page, harvested kalo that will be made into poi and sold to help fund the farm's programs.



but his favorite activity is smashing down the mounds at the end of each harvest cycle. "We play football and wrestle," he says, grinning broadly. "We get totally covered in mud." This muddy fun plays an important role in maintaining the health of the lo'i. The mounds are smashed down to recycle the nutrients, then rebuilt a few months later in preparation for the next planting cycle.

The job on this workday is weeding. The crew fans out to work a patch of keiki kalo, the young shoots that crop up in rings after the parent plants have been harvested. These keiki will provide a second, smaller harvest. The farm currently has seventeen patches; each patch produces about two thousand pounds of kalo a year, although the Wilhelms once pulled four thousand pounds of kalo from a single patch. Dean is right in there, weeding with precise efficiency. No matter what he claims, he's a skilled farmer. But he also keeps an eye on the group, offering advice and occasionally reminding one of the young men to get back to work.

"I see myself more as a coach," Dean tells me, his hands working at a steady

rhythm. Before launching Hookuaaina, he was an English teacher at Olomana School, a state school for incarcerated youth, students awaiting trials and hearings, and students with disciplinary and truancy problems in their regular schools. At Olomana, Dean was inspired to start up a food garden with his students. The boys enjoyed this activity, especially when they were able to harvest, cook and eat what they themselves had grown. But from Dean’s perspective the food itself was secondary. The real gift of the garden, he realized, was that it helped him connect with his students in a meaningful way over a shared task, something he had struggled to achieve inside the four walls of the classroom.

“Connections are most important,” Dean says. “That’s what I know from the youth I worked with. It doesn’t matter if you’ve got this great syllabus of things you want to teach them. They could give a rip about that stuff. They need to understand that I care about them, that I *genuinely* care about them. That I take the time to get to know them a little bit. If I can get just a little bit of that, then and only then do I have the opportunity to share with them something that maybe they’ll learn from and maybe they’ll retain.”

At home the Wilhelms were fostering connections, too, this time with the community they lived in. They held regular gatherings, inviting friends and neighbors over for food, music and hula. “We saw the power in that,” Michele says. “Families were interacting, building relationships.” What would happen, the Wilhelms wondered, if they took the work that Dean was doing at Olomana School, combined it with what they had going on at home, and expanded it? The idea took hold, and they began looking for the right piece of land. It took them three years to find it. “Never in our wildest dreams did we imagine a place like this,” Michele says.

Maunawili is a middle-class neighborhood filled with neatly mowed lawns and ornamental gardens. The lo’i, in this setting, seems incongruous.

Or maybe it’s the suburb that’s incongruous. This area was, after all, a fertile kalo-growing region long before it was a housing development.

But that was ancient history when the Wilhelms bought the land in 2007. It was at the time a combination of illegal dump and boggy jungle. The site of the lo’i was a dense thicket of full-grown hau trees and eight-foot-tall California grass. Dean



Through a nonprofit organization called Hookuaaina, the Wilhelms host a variety of clubs, businesses, teams and community organizations whose members come to build relationships with the land and each other by working in the muddy lo'i. But the Wilhelms' main focus is on mentoring youth, including the kids pictured above. “We’re trying to give people knowledge about the old ways so they can be successful in the future,” Michele says.

was still working full-time then as a teacher, and Michele was pregnant with their fourth child. They were, in a word, overwhelmed. “I didn’t know where to begin,” Dean says.

But begin they did. A welder friend helped them dismantle and dispose of an abandoned jeep that had been left on the site. Other friends and family came with hand tools and weed whackers to haul trash away and to open up a clearing. But the Wilhelms still struggled to make much of a dent until spring 2008, when dozens of people turned out for the first community workday. Among them was Earl Kawa’a, a respected kupuna (elder) in the Hawaiian community. Kawa’a became a regular at the lo‘i, helping the Wilhelms in multiple ways. “Uncle Earl saw our desperation and our need for help,” Dean says gratefully. “He really taught us how to get started and taught us how to work.”

The Wilhelms credit Kawa’a with selecting their nonprofit’s name. “Ho’okua-‘āina” means a return to the values and lifestyle held by the kua’āina, the people of the backcountry. “The country bumpkins,” Dean says, using the term as a high form of praise. “The people with mud between their toes.”

With the support of multiple foundations, the Wilhelms mentor about twenty young people at a time. The mentees range in age from 12 to 18 and typically stay in the program for about nine months. Hoo-kuaaina also runs programs for families, school groups, businesses, community organizations, clubs and teams. Its work is funded mostly through grants. In addition the Wilhelms raise money through the sale of kalo and poi. They call their poi a “social product,” because the proceeds support their youth programs.

Like Dean, Michele is reluctant to call herself a farmer, although she grew up on a potato farm in Northern California. She fled that life as soon as she turned 18. “I ran as far away from it as I could,” she says, her gray-blue eyes crinkling with laughter. “I made vows that I would never marry a farmer or have anything to do with farming. It’s pretty hilarious when I think about it now. We’re farming the Hawaiian potato!”

The Wilhelms met in college in California and were married in Hawai‘i in 1994. When they talk it’s an easy back-and-forth. One waits for the other to finish a sentence, then seamlessly picks up where the other left off. But it was not always this comfortable. Their marriage hit a

rocky patch early on. “It was through coming out of that,” Michele says, “that we really appreciated the fact that there was support and services, that we could find help to get our marriage back on track.” The community, it seems, has always been behind them. “We are the tip of the spear,” Michele says. “There are so many people behind us.”

Back at the lo‘i it’s almost noon, and Dean suggests we wind up and hose down our muddy selves in preparation for lunch. Most of us clamber out of the water, but a lean, tall young man named Deon keeps working with a practiced hand. When I chatted with him earlier, he told me he was a “graduate” of Hookuaaina, but he likes to come back sometimes and work in the lo‘i. “It’s fulfilling,” he says. Dean tells me that Deon was homeless before a friend of the Wilhelms took him in and brought him to the lo‘i seven years ago. Dean remembers him as lost and exceedingly shy but willing to jump in and work hard. Today, Deon mingles and chats confidently with the other volunteers. He visits only on occasion now, as he holds a full-time job as an arborist.

When Dean waxes philosophical, he usually invokes Hawaiian proverbs. But at one point today he recalls the words of Margaret Thatcher from a documentary film he saw. “She said, ‘You know what the problem is today?’” Dean says, quoting the former British prime minister as best as he can remember. “‘It’s that there are too many people wanting to *be* something and not enough people wanting to *do* something.’” He pauses. “Just do,” he says finally. “Just do something that’s of value. And then maybe you’ll be somebody. I use that as a mantra.”

The Wilhelms’ very Hawaiian undertaking faced some criticism early on from an unexpected source: Dean’s Hawaiian grandmother. When she first heard about their plans, she was concerned. “She said, ‘My whole life I was trained to get out of the kalo patch, and he wants to get into the kalo patch!’” Dean recalls. For his grandmother, who equated farming with poverty and backbreaking labor on the plantation, the Wilhelms’ choice seemed regressive. But the way Michele and Dean see it, their project is facing forward. “We’re not trying to live like they did in the past,” Michele says. “We’re trying to give young people knowledge about the old ways so they can be successful in the future.” HH