

KEKUNI'S MARK: THE LASTING BRAND OF KEKUNI BLAISDELL

Jonathan K. Kamakawiwo'ole Osorio

Aloha. I was asked to write this tribute shortly after the passing of Dr. Kekuni Blaisdell in 2016. The passage of time since then has allowed me to reflect and more fully understand the significance of Kekuni's life to the life of our lāhui. This tribute is organized in two parts: The first is a eulogy I composed for Kekuni's services, based on an earlier speech I gave in his honor at the 'Ō'ō Awards in 2011. The second part was written in February 2019, three years after Kekuni's passing.

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I.

Richard Kekuni Akana Blaisdell was born in Honolulu on March 11, 1925. Kaimukī and Waikīkī were his playgrounds as a child, and he became a student at Kamehameha in 1937. His life was certainly inscribed by his experience there, by the mentoring of Donald Kilolani Mitchell, who encouraged him to become a medical doctor, and by the attack on the American Naval Base at Pu‘uloa in his junior year. Later, his appointment to the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission in Hiroshima and Nagasaki made him one of the few people in the world who witnessed both the attack on the American fleet and the terrible retribution that America would exact from the Japanese four years later. I think his compassion for people, and his impatience and mistrust for powerful institutions, probably came from his war and post-war experiences. But they also came from the encouragement and even mentorship of Kānaka who passed before him, Soli Niheu and Puhipau.

I have known Dr. Blaisdell as an activist in social and political movements for more than thirty years. I became acquainted with him shortly after he convened the early Ka Pākaukau forums exploring Hawaiian sovereignty in the 1980s, and gave historical testimony at Ka Ho‘okolokolonui Kānaka Maoli, the international tribunal that Kekuni founded and organized in 1993. Years later I learned how greatly esteemed he was in the medical profession, and among Native Hawaiian practitioners in particular. And I was allowed to give an introductory speech when the members of that profession gathered to honor him and the scholarship program in his name and recognize what a powerful symbol he is to medicine and to all of the best ideals that medicine represents: knowledge; self-reflection and discipline; and above all, compassion.

The Dr. Blaisdell that generations of medical students and patients knew was no different from the Hawaiian patriot who insisted that we Hawaiians are not Americans, who used direct and uncompromising language when confronting powerful American institutions, who showed up at every sovereignty event, no matter how inconvenient, offering his encouragement and delight with the activists who have peacefully pursued the rebirth of the lāhui. None of this is surprising, given the qualities of his intellect and personality, and, especially, given the greatness of his heart. When these qualities reside in a single individual, we usually find that that person walks, talks, and acts in many communities, some of them quite distinct and diverse from one another.

I believe that Dr. Blaisdell discovered something true and important in his professional, community, and political work over the years—that they are not separate and that, indeed they are mutually dependent on one another for the truly effective individual. How often have we known people who were brilliant in their work and yet unable to quite relate with others around them, or gregarious and engaging folk who couldn't be bothered to deliver something promised by deadline. Kekuni knew, I think, the real secret of a completely satisfying life: That work is a blessing, and the people around us are the reason for our work. And if work is a blessing, then we must always be grateful to the people for whom we toil.

Over the years, and at various occasions, I heard Kekuni's name mentioned with the same kind of respect and affection that usually come from people who have first-hand experience with the man—doctors who remember doing rounds with Kekuni Blaisdell as medical students, and Hawaiian activists who know that if you want to try some new initiative to protect some 'āina from a developer, to call out some politician, or to oppose some nefarious legislation or policy, you always wanted Kekuni aboard.

He inspired confidence because he knew what he was doing and because he cared about what he was doing, and you knew that when he was present he would bring all of his experience and his wide range of contacts with him. Over the years, we in the movement have come to truly love this man for his complete dedication to Hawaiian causes, yes, but also because of his trustworthiness. He stood for good things always and thus encouraged us to continue, to fight for the land, for the lāhui, for justice, knowing that the struggle may occupy us for a lifetime. We look at this man and understand that he is the poster child for that struggle, and if anyone of us could reach his age and look back at a similar lifetime of commitment and work, regardless of what we have achieved, it will have been a blessed life indeed.

My mother used to say that when all is said and done, you answer only to God for your life. She didn't just mean that there is an audience between my soul and the Creator when I die, although she might have had that in mind. She meant also that God represents important values and ideals that we human beings also have to answer to: an unstinting respect for truth and integrity; a dedication of heart and soul to excellence; and a joy for God's creations, including humanity. Consider Kekuni, and not just what he has done, but how he has lived his life. Think of those tens of thousands of photographs of the tens of thousands of people whom he has met and talked with and recorded. Think of what that suggests about what he really values in life. And then you will know what makes a truly great person.

II.

Kekuni passed three years ago, after several years of failing health had curtailed all but a few ceremonial appearances in public. A stroke stole his mobility and complicated his speech, but I was always struck by the brightness in his eyes when we visited or when his daughter Nālani would bring him to a gathering of activists who adored him, or to a special ceremony held to honor him. One always saw recognition in his gaze, and this was indeed Kekuni's 'ano, his very nature. He recognized the beauty and the value of the people he was seeing, even for the very first time.

But I know that he had a particular aloha for some of the old warriors like Soli Niheu, Puhipau, Richard Kinney, Mili Trask, and Davianna McGregor. His connections to Hawaiian sovereignty activists were wide as well as deep, and while he spoke often about independence from America, I don't remember ever hearing him insult people or organizations that were pursuing federal recognition, a political red line that seemed for some of us to be not just a disagreement over our future, but more of a fundamental difference in how we view ourselves.

Maybe that is what set Kekuni apart, not from other people, but from the need to be identified with a side. The fact that he was of our parents' generation—the wartime, heroic, American generation that defeated the Axis and then proceeded to transform Hawai'i from plantation to megatourist destination, juxtaposed against one of the most militarized pieces of real estate in the world—is an enigma. That generation should not have produced the most enduring advocate for decolonizing Hawai'i. The Hawaiian movements in the 1970s were symbolized by cutoff jeans, serious young men, and fiery, articulate women, almost all of us born after the Pacific War. That era certainly did not call to mind a skinny, middle-aged man in a white doctor's tunic and a soft, kindly voice.

And men and women of that generation who could even conceive of the notion of Hawai'i being independent from America, like Kekuni, Frenchy DeSoto, and Buzzy Agard, were rare. I wonder if they knew how much their encouragement, as mākuā, was essential to our endeavors to restore ourselves. Certainly there would have been a Kawaipuna Prejean, a George Helm, a Liko Martin, a Ho'oiipo DeCambra, and a Haunani-Kay, but would they have been as aware of the depth and intelligence of the support around them if not for Kekuni's weekly gatherings, Ka Pākaukau, and his Ho'okolokolonui, the tribunal in 1993 that brought us together with international activists Sharon Venn, Maivan Lam, Richard Falk, and Moana Jackson?

Kekuni was always so impressed with the talent and passion that surrounded him, and he was overjoyed by the momentum we created in the 1990s to restore our language and our stories to our lāhui. And while he was always prepared to go to the microphone and weave his favorite words, “Kanakanā Maoli” and “decolonize” into what was always a short exhortation for us to carry on the struggle, his presence was more of a visual reassurance of the continuity of the Hawaiian movement, as it seemed like he was everywhere for more than four decades, spanning the century, everywhere there was a gathering of Kānaka Maoli.



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The legacy of Kekuni, and others of his generation, is our generation. Most of our generation is already older than he was when he conceived the tribunal, and this is significant; there are so many more of us to encourage the next generation of Kānaka. We also see his stamp on us, a kind of gentle, reasonable, persistence and clarity about this mission that has driven us since our youth. I have always thought that our Mō‘ī Lili‘uokalani set an almost impossible standard of leadership when she protected her people from a bloody American takeover while urging us to remember who we are and to onipa‘a, to move while rooted to our ‘āina and ‘ike kupuna.

But it is not an impossible standard, for Kekuni surely exemplified that guiding and protective hand, embracing our blistering, uncompromising rhetoric with the same joy as when he acknowledged the keiki of Hālau Kū Māna singing for Lā Kū'oko'a. He knew everyone, it seemed, and he gave every impression of being as comfortable with the eager, 'eleu among us as the burdened ones, struggling to survive. It was probably the healer in him that recognized the 'eha and the brokenness of our people and enabled him to see us all with such compassion and confidence.

Those of us who have aged in this movement have perhaps come to resemble Kekuni, I think. We have strong opinions, we argue fiercely with each other, but we greet each other with honi, and we treat each other kindly and as family. And no, we are not a unified people, but we are a people, and we recognize, in the next generation of Kānaka, younger and far more numerous versions of ourselves.

Following his death, Kekuni's family created a Life Tributes page where dozens of people left poetry and songs and beautiful remembrances of Kekuni. Several remarked on the meaning of his name, calling to mind the 'ōahi ceremonies, with flaming brands that were flung from the cliffs above Hā'ena. I think of the brightness of Kekuni's eyes, darting here and there, recognizing others; I think of the brand, the stamp that he has placed on students and colleagues and admirers; and I think of the thrill and arc of his life, burning and inspiring in the darkness. And I think of those lives still to come.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Jonathan Kay Kamakawiwo'ole Osorio is dean of Hawai'inuiākea School of Hawaiian Knowledge. Dr. Osorio received his PhD in history from the University of Hawai'i. At Kamakakūokalani, he has developed and taught classes in history, literature, law as culture, music as historical texts, and research methodologies for and from indigenous peoples. His recent publications include *The Value of Hawai'i: Knowing the Past and Shaping the Future*, which he co-edited and authored, and *Dismembering Lāhui: A History of the Hawaiian Nation to 1887*. He is also a composer and singer and has been a Hawaiian music recording artist since 1975.