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Women talk story of good times and bad

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At age 12, Puanani Burgess had lived in 12 different places. It got to the point that her family never unpacked.

One day, Burgess noticed her grandmother never moved and inquired why. The answer was "different time, different place, different situation."

When her grandmother was 14 years old and living in Japan, a marriage broker negotiated a bride price with her father. No deal was reached. She stayed. A year later, the marriage broker returned, but she again stayed. The following year, her grandmother, then 16, was sold to a skinny, tall Japanese man in Hawaii, a place she knew nothing about.

In her best kimono, Burgess' grandmother boarded a small boat and lived on the crowded bottom deck. During her journey, some passengers got sick and others died. She survived, only to later find herself standing at the pier in Honolulu, looking for the man who best resembled that of the one in the photograph she possessed. Eventually he would find her. She would tell him, "Once I put my bag down, I will not move anymore."

"She never did," said Burgess, a noted poet and cultural translator. "No matter how chaotic life was, I always knew where she was. She anchored me in space, time and love."

Burgess along with four other Oahu women -- Lucy Gay, Hooipo DeCambra, Karen Young and Grace Alvaro Caligtan -- gathered late Sunday afternoon at the Royal Kona Resort in Keauhou where they talked about growing up and lessons learned. Their performance, "Papayas and Bitter Melons: Tales of the Bitter and Sweet," revealed how they have managed, survived and thrived in their lives. It was a way of putting life into perspective and bringing hope in today's faltering economy. They reminded several audience members of their childhood memories and encouraged all in attendance to share their stories, their legacy.

Gay grew up in Palama, a place west of Honolulu that was "easy, uncomplicated, clear cut and unordinary." She recalled a time when neighbors from their verandahs settled their fights, talked about their daily happenings, relished the stillness of the night or watched Clark -- a boy in the neighborhood who own a BB gun -- shoot giant rats that ran across the power lines.

Her family ate the same breakfast of a bowl of mush, hot chocolate with water and bread unless it was guava season. That's when they would hop over the Kaneohe Ranch fence to harvest guava for jelly or candy.

As a girl, Gay often plugged her ears and cringed when watching her father leave for work every morning. She prayed that her truck wouldn't backfire because she didn't want the neighbors to know her dad drove "a junk-a-lunk truck."

On a narrow cow lane, she along with her siblings and the neighborhood children played games, not to win, but for the sheer joy of playing. There were no poor losers, only poor winners. Gay and her siblings also got their morning chores done quickly and without grumbling because it meant they arrived earlier at school. There they could play on the playground equipment without lines or on uncrowded freshly cut grass until the first bell rung. Fun and joy was associated with school. To this day, Gay arrives at 5:30 a.m. from Windward Oahu in Heeia Kea to the Leeward Community College Waianae, where she is the director for Waianae educational opportunities.

DeCambra was the last child of her mother -- a Hawaiian fisher woman -- and the first child in her family to be born in a western hospital. The doctors had to break her arm to bring her totally out of the birth canal -- a move that saved her life, as well as her mother's. Afterwards, DeCambra spent the first weeks of her life visiting a healer in Makiki -- something that was not to be talked about.

DeCambra grew up during the 1950s. She remembers her mother secretly invoking the gods and goddess of Hawaii in their Papakolea home, while DeCambra was told by others to forget those rituals and hide her culture. This was especially true at her Catholic school where all things Hawaiian were forbidden. So when her mother took DeCambra back for a checkup, the doctors were surprised that her arm had healed so rapidly and well. They asked her mother what she had done to help the healing, but she didn't mention the healer.

Burgess often uses an exercise that requires people to tell three stories. The first is of their names. The second is about their community. The third is about their gift. Burgess did this once with a group of high school students. Everything went effortlessly until it was this one boy's turn.

According to Burgess, he told the stories of his name and community well, but when it came time to tell the story of his

gift he became defensive. He revealed he was in a special education class and struggled with reading and doing math. He asked, "Why you make me shame for, ask me that kind question? What kind gift you have? If I had gift, you think I be here?"

Burgess said he "shut down and shut up." She felt ashamed. Later, Burgess shopped at a local grocery store and saw the boy standing in the same aisle. His back was towards her so she tried to back up and leave quickly. But the boy turns around. He hugs her and says he has thought about what she said for two weeks.

He says, "I cannot do that math stuff and I cannot read good, but Aunty, when I stay in the ocean, I can call the fish and the fish they come every time. Every time I can put food on my family table. Every time."

"He's a genius. But in our society the way schools are run, he is considered rubbish. He is totally destroyed, not appreciated at all," Burgess said. "Think what would his life have been if curriculum were gift-based? If we were able to see the gift in each of our children and taught around that gift? What would happen if our community was gift-based?"
