

# Planting the seeds of healthy lifestyles

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Prior to moving from North Carolina to Hawaii Island, 25-year-old Jane Lee was unsure what she stood for. While possessing certain interests and principles, nothing really stuck until she started working on area farms and realized food sovereignty was her passion.

Lee instantly felt a strong connection with the North Kohala community and its goal to produce 50 percent of the food it consumes. Helping reach that aim and being part of the inspiring collaborative partnerships toward food self-sufficiency were more important to Lee than disputing the goal's attainability.

Upon hearing about a national service program connecting keiki to real food and helping them grow up healthy, Lee jumped at the opportunity to have an even greater role in the local food movement.

Part of the AmeriCorps service network, FoodCorps was launched in 2011 to address childhood obesity and food insecurity in underserved communities through the promotion of school gardens, farm-to-school programs and nutritional education. FoodCorps participants believe when knowledge, engagement and access are implemented together, children's attitudes toward the consumption of healthy food improve.

The program operates in 15 states, including Hawaii, which was added this year. The Kohala Center, an independent, community-based center for research, education and conservation, is the host site for the state's program — a fitting testament to the successes and strengths of the center's Hawaii Island School Garden Network.

"The movement to reconnect our children and youth to the sources of their food and health, and to renew their connections to the aina, the source of all life, is well recognized at the community level," said Nancy Redfeather, Hawaii Island School Garden Network program director and FoodCorps Hawaii host site supervisor. "To have the national FoodCorps select Hawaii for additional support is a result of the work of Hawaii's garden and classroom teachers, principals and communities throughout the islands."

Lee is among the inaugural eight-member cohort of FoodCorps Hawaii. For 11 months, they will work at locations that have already begun to improve school food and need help in expanding their work or attaining a particular vision. On Hawaii Island, there are five FoodCorps members: Lee at Kohala Elementary, Jessica Sobocinski at Honaunau Elementary, Jolyne Oyama at Naalehu Elementary, Julia Nemoto at Waimea Middle and Leinaala Kealoha at Kua O Ka La Public Charter schools.

The eight were introduced to the public Friday afternoon during the launch of FoodCorps Hawaii at Malaai, the culinary garden at Waimea Middle. These members were chosen from roughly 1,000 applicants nationwide. All had the desired qualities, including knowledge of local culture and values, dedication to healthy communities, a sense of kuleana to foster youth, and the willingness to develop innovative practices to build food systems.

The members began their service Sept. 1 and each will be paid \$15,000 for the year. Those eligible will also receive a \$5,550 federal education award to apply to their student loans when they finish, said Amelia Pedini, fellow and coordinator of the FoodCorps Hawaii program.

Before joining FoodCorps Hawaii, Oyama was a stay-at-home mother of three who regularly volunteered at Naalehu Elementary. Her participation in this program stems from her love of teaching keiki about what healthy food is and where it comes from. Her family maintains a garden at their Naalehu home and she has witnessed first-hand its value, including how it has taught them to appreciate and prefer homegrown food. It's not unusual for her children, ages 4, 7 and 9, to now fight over newly sprouted strawberries and tomatoes or say their favorite meal is salad. She spoke about how children's enthusiasm is contagious, and if we can get people to be excited about growing their own food or being conscious about their food habits, it will make a real difference.

Oyama said she also understands how difficult it is for many in her community to get access to fresh, wholesome food or making healthy meals, particularly when there's a great deal of commuting and time seems very limited among other responsibilities. Still, she wants to show families how knowledge and skills taught at the school's garden can be applied at home by having community harvests and classes possibly in conjunction with the school's family reading nights. She also wants to help rebuild Pacific Islanders' connection to their own healthier traditional diets and connect cultures by having a native plant section in the garden and incorporating Hawaiian values.

During Friday's launch event, the value of school gardens and building relationships were touted by several school and government officials, along with Kohala Center representatives and community members. These gardens were repeatedly described as dynamic educational settings for kids to get their hands dirty, experience what they're learning first-hand and make powerful connections. For some kids, a school garden can be a place where they feel accepted and safe. Learning to feed yourself is empowering, too.

Speakers also shared how edible education and the food movement, now mainstream, are teaching the public global citizenship, as well as how to nourish themselves and each other. They mentioned how FoodCorps Hawaii is a model that can be used to build upon and greatly assist current efforts, which are attempting to put high-quality food into school cafeterias and create a lifetime of good health and good eating.

Following the celebration, attendees enjoyed a lunch prepared by members of FoodCorps Hawaii, Slow Food and Waimea Middle.