

## Local News

### Big Islander makes history with her degree

*Woman first person of Hawaiian ancestry to earn doctorate in Hawaiian language*

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Published: Saturday, December 18, 2010 7:32 AM HST

Kauanoë Kamana is a pioneer in the Hawaiian community, even if she is too humble to admit it.

She's a founder and the president of the nonprofit 'Aha Punana Leo, which has revived the Hawaiian language with thousands of new, young speakers. She is an associate professor at the University of Hawaii at Hilo's Ka Haka 'Ula O Ke'elikelani College of Hawaiian Language, and principal of the Hawaiian immersion school Ke Kula 'O Nawahiokalaniopuu.

Today, at UH-Hilo's fall commencement ceremonies, Kamana will receive a new honor -- a hood, a diploma and a doctorate in Hawaiian and indigenous language and culture revitalization.

She will be the first person of Hawaiian ancestry so honored by the College of Hawaiian Language, and the second to earn the degree after Katarina Edmonds, a Maori educator from New Zealand, in 2008. Kamana, 59, was born in Honolulu and raised in Kalihi, Oahu, and in Molokai. It was a time when the last native speakers of Hawaiian, outside of Niihau, were dwindling. The state of the language was "dismal," she recalls.

"Actual conversation in Hawaiian is not done in the home, which is typical of my generation," Kamana said.

She attended UH-Manoa in the 1970s, earning a Bachelor of Arts in Hawaiian studies and a master's degree in linguistics. It was there that Kamana learned conversational Hawaiian, and began helping its recovery.

"We were recording the last native speakers during that time," she said. "We were able to meet and talk and learn from those last native speakers during the 1970s."

In 1983, she joined the board of 'Aha Punana Leo, which brings together 3- and 4-year-olds in an immersive environment where the students are fed solely their native language and culture.

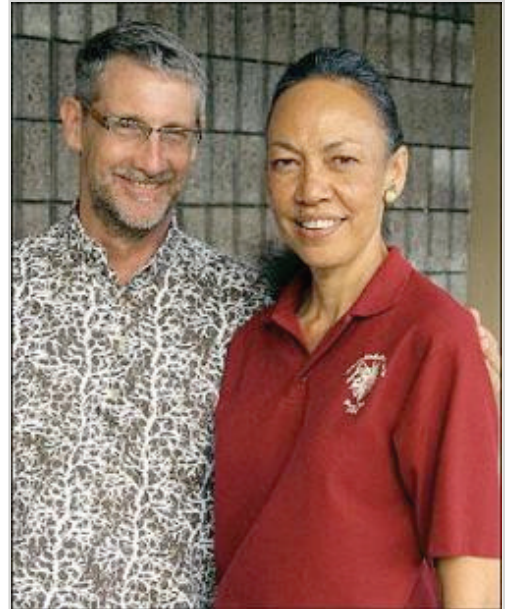
Kamana was among those pushing the state to change its laws and education policies to allow a Hawaiian language environment. The immersion schools graduated their first class in 1999. Despite all her work in rescuing the language from obscurity, Kamana acknowledges that much remains to be done, and it can't all be done in her lifetime.

"It is a struggle. Doing this kind of work is a struggle," she said. But Kamana believes it's worth saving the linchpin of the Hawaiian culture.

"Within our language is our culture," she said. "Learning to speak Hawaiian first gives a person a world view that is grounded in the Hawaiian language and culture."

Kamana's dissertation is titled "Mo'oki'ina Ho'oponopono: Ke O OKa 'Ike Ku'una Hawai'i Ma Ke Kula 'O Nawahiokalani'opu'u," with a focus on traditional Hawaiian conflict resolution practices at the Keaau school.

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Kauanoë Kamana, seen with husband Pila Wilson, is the first person of Hawaiian ancestry to earn a doctorate in Hawaiian and indigenous language and culture revitalization from the University of Hawaii at Hilo. - William Ing/Tribune-Herald

In 2009 she received a Mellon Hawaii fellowship for doctoral candidates that required a sabbatical from work to complete a dissertation within a year's time.

"The value of the knowledge lies in application," said Kalena Silva, the college's director. Ho'oponopono, he said, is useful in schools and in the wider Hawaiian community. It can be used in the school context, "but it comes from the home."

"We're very thankful that the university has allowed us to do this, encouraged us to do this," Silva said. "It's been groundbreaking in many ways, traditional in many ways."

Kamana lives in Hilo with husband Pila Wilson, who is another professor in the College of Hawaiian Language. They have two grown children, living in Hilo and Honolulu.

"The Ph.D. is our highest academic honor and investing these two students with doctoral degrees is highly significant," Chancellor Donald Straney said in a statement. "And as the first doctorate presented by the College of Hawaiian Language to a native Hawaiian student, this events marks a major milestone in the history of UH-Hilo and the island of Hawaii."

The commencement ceremony begins at 9 a.m. today in the college's New Gymnasium. A total of 175 people will be honored, including 23 master's degree candidates. Kathryn Matayoshi, superintendent of the state Department of Education, is the keynote speaker. Edmonds, who earned the College of Hawaiian Language doctorate in 2008, was unable to participate in commencement ceremonies at the time and will be honored along with Kamana.

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