



Plants grow alongside healthy relationships.

# Green thumb seniors

*Elders mentor troubled youth at Maui Farm. Gardening program teaches them about living, thriving and growing positive relationships.*

## Madeline Rune

At the Maui Farm, activity is the best therapy. One such activity gives emotionally and behaviorally challenged young people a good excuse to get into the garden, with the help of new “adopted” grandparents.

The Gardening With Our Kupuna program links elders from the Kaunoa Senior Center with young people in a mentorship program centered around horticulture and healing. “The program is designed to nurture the relationship between young and elderly as they in turn care for the aina,” says program director Donna Vida. Vida, who grew up a farmer’s daugh-

ter, knows the therapeutic value in working with plants and animals, and now brings those values to the youth at Maui Farm.

Based in Makawao, the Maui Farm is a long-term family-style home for troubled youth ages 10 through 21. The first therapeutic residential farm program in Hawai‘i, the nearly 10-acre farm offers youth an opportunity to learn responsibility and gain self-worth through positive experiences with people, plants and animals. These youth are most often referred through the state’s child welfare, juvenile justice and behavioral health

systems. Some are reunited with their families after a temporary stay on the farm; others live there until they reach adulthood.

Seven kids participate in the intergenerational gardening program, each matched to a senior mentor. The youth and their kupuna work together once a week, designing gardens together. As Vida explains, this work is healing on many levels.

“Horticultural therapy helps the kids, as well as the adults, recognize the relationship between humans and nature. In addition, the gardening becomes a tool to meet developmental needs,



Learning how to plant a garden gives seniors the opportunity to guide troubled teens in important program.

as nature becomes a mirror in how the kids relate to themselves and others.”

The gardening becomes a metaphor for teaching kids how to manage their own lives. For example, youth must set physical boundaries for the garden

decrease in law violations, drug and alcohol use, acting out and stealing.”

According to Vida, many youth come to the farm with a history of abuse and trust issues. Through the Ohana Model of family-style living and programs

the program open-minded with a hope to serve young people. But they are also have fun at the gardening itself.”

According to one of the senior mentors named Irish, “I enjoy gardening and sharing it with the youth. I



In the garden youth learn nurturing and then practice it on themselves.

area, which in turn can help them learn to set boundaries in their own personal lives. "The act of gardening helps them connect to personal issues and challenges," says Vida. "When a young person isn't motivated to tend to their garden, how motivated are they to tend to their own lives?"

According to Vida, the 20-person staff at Maui Farm sees usually positive changes in the youth within three months or less of being at the Farm. What are some of the tangible changes they see? "Many youth come to us with poor academic performance and truancy problems. We get them stable and motivated to attend school," says Vida. "We also see a

like gardening with our Kupuna, the kids begin to bond with adults and peers.

"Most kids come here with little understanding of how a family functions—the roles, and responsibilities of each member," says Vida. "We teach them to (learn) the individual must contribute to the ohana. We see improvements in their ability to learn new values, and to contribute. They learn to give of themselves, and they gain a sense of esteem because of that."

The seniors helping the youth also gain self-esteem through the program. "The elders like the fact that they are needed, and that they still have a significant role to play in the community," says Vida. "They come to

get satisfaction knowing that possibilities are being offered to these youth to turn their lives around. They realize they have choices."

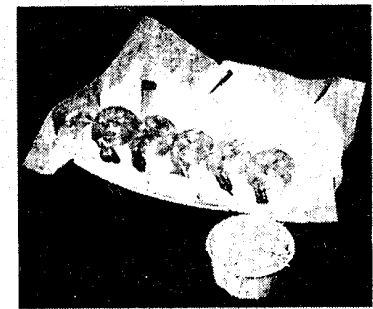
Another senior mentor, Theo, agrees. "I feel great about the one on one relationship that I'm developing with the youth, and seeing the trust grow in our relationship."

A nonprofit organization, The Maui Farm provides a continuum of residential programs including group foster care, therapeutic care, and independent living services. In 10 years, The Maui Farm has served close to 100 youth. For more information, contact The Maui Farm at 579-8271. ✱

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