

Forgiveness Day points way to healing

The event promotes education, sharing and dialogue to help people overcome historical hurts

[By Pat Gee](#)

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photo by Jill Braden
COURTESY HAWAII FORGIVENESS PROJECT

Participants at last year's Hawaii International Forgiveness Day placed flowers at the feet of the Queen Lili'uokalani statue at the state Capitol.

The national conversation about racial stereotyping triggered by the Florida trial over the killing of black teenager Trayvon Martin might benefit from going through the same steps of reconciliation that Hawaii residents must take to finally achieve peace over the toppling of the Hawaiian kingdom, said one organizer of the Hawaii Forgiveness Project.

People divided by the deep wounds of a tragedy need to express their anger and hurt to one another in a dialogue that would hopefully lead to resolution, said Meleanna Aluli Meyer, a project organizer and local filmmaker.

The 11th annual Hawaii International Forgiveness Day will honor Queen Lili'uokalani, the last reigning monarch of Hawaii, as a model of peace, strength and forgiveness. The free event, featuring a panel of speakers, entertainment and art displays, will be held at the state Capitol rotunda from 2 to 5 p.m. Aug. 4.

Meyer said, "This day is really an invitation for people to come together and be reflective about the action to forgive (and) embracing what it really means. Until people get what are the underlying causes for all of this sadness and horror," referring to tragedies that have affected the country, "nothing's going to change."

"I so deeply feel for my black American brothers and sisters, my friends, because injustice is injustice. It has no color. For the American public not to see the injustice of racial profiling or prejudice, it just means that this country has a lot more work to do.

"But each of us has to take our responsibility. It's not just the other person, but what are each of us doing to commit to causes of justice or injustice," said Meyer, who is biracial.

(Martin was killed last year by a biracial white and Hispanic man, George Zimmerman, who was found not guilty, a verdict that sparked debate over the way African-American men sometimes become immediate suspects because of their skin color.)

Meyer said Queen Lili'uokalani is her personal role model because "she made her life's work a practice of forgiveness. She could've been bitter and resentful, but she wrote music as an act for herself to deal with, to grapple with serious issues of disappointment, and anger and upset" over the overthrow in 1893. Meyer is a local filmmaker working on "Ku'u 'Aina Aloha" ("Beloved Land, Beloved Country"), a documentary about the deposed queen, supported by Pulitzer Prize winner Alice Walker, author of "The Color Purple."

For the rest of her life, Lili'uokalani's actions embodied "a conscious choosing to move forward and be an exemplar to the people and to continue her righteous fight for social justice, for the returns of her lands that were illegally stolen, and for the rights of her people," she said. "It's important to understand that there's a continuum. ... You don't just get to a place where everything's good and well and, yeah, I forgive you. It's an ongoing process, and we're in that ongoing process, all of us," Meyer said.

Michael North, communications director of The Forgiveness Project, said a passage in Lili'uokalani's well-known song the "Queen's Prayer" supports the idea that she is a model of forgiveness:

"Behold not with malevolence

The sins of man

But forgive

And cleanse"

In her song, written while imprisoned at Iolani Palace, the queen wanted to encourage her people to resist the takeover, but not with violence. She was saying "violence and resistance and revolution will only kill many people on both sides, will put Hawaii in a bad light around the world and could well result in the death of our culture," North said.

"She said we need to take the higher ground, and we need ultimately to forgive them, even though what they do is unjust. ... That example is a powerful one, and of course, it has resonance for our world today," he said.

"There are still people in the Hawaiian community who feel that their role and their rights have not been appreciated or understood. We need to heal that. We need to open it up and look at it frankly, understand what the equitable result should be and move toward it," said North, co-founder of The Zhou Enlai Peace Institute.

There are three stages "we're trying to underline" at the Sunday event for people of Hawaii and the rest of the nation, especially in regard to coming to terms with what happened in Florida, North said.

The first is education — an accurate recounting of history or the facts in a neutral way that is agreed upon by both sides. Then the dialogue can begin so that both sides can understand each other's perspective. The third step is an authentic expression of feelings, describing the deepest wounds and misunderstandings in as much detail as possible, he said.

"We're going to try to stick our toes into the fourth stage, which is the beginning of reconciliation. In a symbolic act it comes in an apology. You can't really make an authentic apology until you've gone through the first three stages," North said.

The U.S. government's official apology to Hawaii in 1993 did not offer sufficient healing because the first three steps were skipped over, said.

"Part of the program (slated for the Honolulu event) is lei making. There's a way to make a lei which is prayerful, which is sacred. You can put your energy — Hawaiians would say you put your mana into the lei — and you can state your feelings and resolve your feelings in a physical form. It's kind of a ritual or a sacrament, even.

"The Hawaiian people will be there to teach us to make lei (from ti leaves), and we will offer those lei to each other as symbols of our willingness to change (to forgive). And we'll offer those lei to the queen as our apology for the injustice done to her and her people. ... We believe something special could happen in people's hearts," North said.

11th ANNUAL HAWAII INTERNATIONAL FORGIVENESS DAY

When: 2 to 5 p.m. Aug. 4

Where: State Capitol rotunda

Who: Queen Liliuokalani will be honored with the Heroine of Forgiveness Recognition Award.

Recipients: Representatives of the Queen Lili'uokalani Trust will accept the award.

Cost: Free, open to all

Reservations: www.hawaiiiforgivenessproject.org/reservations.htm or call 216-1993

Performers: Kumu John Keola Lake's Halau Mele, George Kahumoku Jr., Kuuipo Kumokahi

Speakers: Poka Laenui (Hayden Burgess), a Hawaiian activist; Ha'aheo Guanson of the Pacific Justice and Reconciliation Center; the Communities in Schools of Waipahu; local filmmaker Meleanna Aluli Meyer

Art awards: Winning images will be displayed, poetry read.