



Aloha Project Joy



Behind the postcard perfect surf, tropical flowers, and grass skirts there is another Hawaii, a Hawaii landscaped by generational poverty, homelessness, drug addiction, and early childhood trauma. Intense poverty occurs in the major cities like Honolulu where the cost of living is extremely high compared to the rest of the country. While it's tremendously difficult for natives who depend on the low working wage, living hand to mouth has the greatest impact on their children.

Enter the Keiki Steps program.

Keiki (the Hawaiian word for “children”) Steps is a preschool for Hawaii’s poorest children. The program is part of INPEACE, an organization that helps improve the quality of life for native Hawaiians who are living in poverty.

Keiki Steps works with parents too – the majority of whom are single mothers facing serious challenges every day, from feeding their kids to keeping their electricity running. INPEACE is committed to training and hiring these parents to become teachers. Today, over 95% of the teachers at Keiki Steps are mothers who were once parent participants.

Shondell Placio is one of these mothers. The decision to take her daughter to Keiki Steps was an easy one—she needed daycare for her daughter and she also dreamt of someday becoming a teacher. Keiki Steps made a profound impact on both of their lives – inspiring Shondell to enter college to earn her bachelor’s degree and giving her daughter the love and structure that she needed to transition seamlessly to school.

Keiki Steps believes that the parent is the child’s first teacher. However, Jennifer Tempe, INPEACE human resource manager, saw that the parents and teachers at Keiki Steps were burnt out. Many were still on welfare with little or no education. Without joy and playfulness, how could these adults be effective teachers? How could she renew their spirits?

Two years ago, Tempe was on the Life is good website buying a t-shirt when she came across Project Joy. She instantly fell in love with Project Joy’s mission of bringing joy and play back into the lives of childcare providers so that they could, in turn, pass that joy on to the children. She decided to make it her personal mission to bring Project Joy to Hawaii.

Tempe contacted Steve Gross, Project Joy founder, and told him of her concerns for the children and families with whom she worked. Less than a year later, Tempe had the honor of inviting 50 teachers and family resource aides from the Keiki Steps program to Hawaii's first Project Joy Training Retreat.

The 2-day event was held at the Marriott Ko Olina Resort, one of Hawaii's most beautiful resorts, typically reserved for top professional athletes (such as NFL Pro Bowl football players) and Hollywood celebrities. Gross and Tempe wanted to find a place that would honor these teachers as true heroes.

"They are the protectors of civilization," says Gross. "What they do is a lot more important than playing football."

In Hawaii, "ohana" means family, and to Hawaiians, family is everything. The Project Joy Playmakers knew that they were entering a very close-knit community with a rich culture and they weren't sure how they'd be received as a group from the mainland. But within minutes of the training, the Project Joy crew and Keiki Steps teachers became ohana.

"Playfulness, joy, and love are universal," explains Gross. "They can break down any barriers."

The training was a huge success. The teachers were engaged from the start and they were constantly laughing, learning, and sharing.

Tempe has been in the human resources business for 25 years. She's heard many motivational speakers, but none of them can compare to Project Joy. "Project Joy can move anyone," she says.

For Placio, Project Joy has crystallized the importance of playfulness as a trait that needs to be cultivated in children.

“We are not perfect,” says Placio, “we are trying to make the best of things and watching the joy that these games bring to the parents and children who participate together safely—it’s what I love to see and it’s why I became a teacher.”

Before Project Joy left, Tempe gave Gross a small flying pig. She explained that she had recently lost her mother who collected flying pigs because she felt anything was possible. Tempe handed Gross the pig, and with tears in her eyes, she said, “After getting Project Joy to Hawaii, I know we can change lives. Anything is possible.”



Hawaii’s first graduating class of Playmakers