





islander scholars: unfurled growth

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Islander Scholar Director Laurie Au
(left) stands with 2017 Islander
Scholar Treysen Moke from Ke Kula 'o
Nāwahiokalani'ōpu'u public
charter school.

Last year, Roland Afaga Jr. was a typical high school student. He'd just finished his junior year at Honoka'a High and Intermediate School and was worried about his grades, getting into college, and his future. Then, he was selected to participate in the Islander Scholars program.

The program, now in its third year, believes that there's more to a successful school career than good grades and high test scores. School principals select students like Afaga based on their character, contributions to the community, and commitment to improving the quality of life in Hawai'i.

In June 2017, Afaga had the opportunity to connect with like-minded students, learn from cultural practitioners and mentors, share about his community and 'ohana, and deepen his understanding of his kuleana.

For three days, Afaga and 25 other participants lived and worked together at Camp Pālehua in Kapolei. Their goal was to understand and exemplify the unique values of Hawai'i. Afaga says, "We learned what it means to embody the characteristics of a true islander, which is having a deep sense of place, caring for others, and working to give back."

Together they explored the ahupua'a of Honouliuli to connect with the land. At the top of Mauna Kapu, each student reflected on the importance of place and described somewhere special to them. As he listened to the others, Afaga felt inspired. He proudly spoke about Honoka'a, his hometown on north side of the Big Island. "I realized there were others like me who care about the same things I value," Afaga says. "I felt like I really belonged."

The students received guidance from facilitators from Islander Institute, Mālama Learning Center, and other community leaders who care about Hawai'i's future. In large and small groups, they discussed what it meant to be an islander.

Listening to the inspirational facilitators and other students, Afaga learned that an islander is so much more than just a person from an island. "It's a responsibility. It's about taking care of yourself, looking out for others, and making sure that everything you do helps to benefit the future of Hawai'i," he says.

One particularly memorable experience was when the inaugural 2016 class joined the 2017 participants at Huilua Fishpond at Kahana Bay in Windward O'ahu. The group's collective strength and spirit outweighed individual ability as everyone worked together to move large rocks to create a wall for the fishpond. Afaga was thankful to be able to connect with past program participants. "I look up to them," he says. "I hope to do the same thing they're doing and give back to Islander Scholars and the community."

During the closing ceremony, participants received a koru (spiral) pendant specially crafted for them by Hawaiian artist Ahukini Kupihea. The pendant symbolizes the unfurling growth and strength of each student. Then participants shared what they'd learned in the program and how they'd perpetuate the spirit of an Islander Scholar. Reflecting on the past three days, Afaga says, "Everyone has a different definition of success. For me, it's doing what you can do, what you're meant to do, and feeling good about it."

After Islander Scholars, Afaga felt different. "My mindset changed," he says. "I still have ambitions to do well in school and go to college, but I know that's not the only thing that matters."

After graduating from Honoka'a High, Afaga explored his interest in computers at the Google Summer Institute. He's currently a student at Santa Clara University. No matter what happens, Islander Scholars will always be a part of him. "It was an eye-opening experience I'll never forget," he says.

To learn more about Islander Scholars, visit islanderinstitute.com/scholars or contact:

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Right: At the top of Mauna Kapu, the 2017 Islander Scholars listen to the mo'olelo of Pālehua by Kehaulani Kupuhea.



Above left: Islander Scholars, along with their guides and community members, worked together to move large rocks to help build the wall of Huihua Fishpond in Kahana. From left: Justin Texeira, Trey Garcia, and Austin Hashimoto.

Above right: The 2017 Islander Scholars (with Roland Afaga Jr. in glasses) at Camp Pālehua.

Following page: Islander Scholars walk together on the beach.



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