

# A Mother's Love

## Neighbors Profiles of our Community

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By SARAH RUPPENTHAL , For The Maui News

Forty- four years ago, Brooke Brown was seven months pregnant with her second child. "We knew it was a girl," she said. "We were having a hard time coming up with a name for the baby."

One afternoon, Brown and her husband were taking a drive when a song came on the radio.

The song was called "Hilo One." It was a familiar tune, but on that day, the opening lyrics caught her attention:



Emalia Brown Guard, shown with son Kahalakea, fought valiantly against an aggressive form of cancer, but lost the battle on Feb. 10, 2014. Today, her mother, Brooke Brown, carries on her legacy through Na Keiki O Emalia ("Emalia's Children").

"Aia i Hilo One/Ka eha a ka manao/O sweet Emalia/Okou aloha ia ("There at sandy Hilo/Is what pains my thoughts/Sweet Emalia/She is my love")."

Brown glanced over at her husband in the driver's seat. He silently met her gaze, and they exchanged a knowing smile. "That's when we decided to call her Emalia," she said. "And when she was born, we knew we'd picked the perfect name."

Brown, who was raised in Honolulu, moved to Maui in 1974. At the time, Emalia was 3; Brown's son, Zadoc, was 4. "Moving here was a good decision," she said. "Maui has been so good to my family."

Like many mothers and daughters, Brown and Emalia shared a special bond. "We were joined at the hip," she said. "Emalia and I were very, very close." So much, in fact, they

decided to matriculate at the same time: In 1993, Emalia received her degree in exercise kinesiology, while Brown earned her doctorate in psychology.

Brown went on to work as a clinical psychologist in California for nearly two decades. Emalia became a physical education teacher at her alma mater, Seabury Hall. "Her students adored her; she was so giving and loving and had such a beautiful presence," Brown recalled. "Life was good for both of us . . . and then everything changed in 2012."

She remembers the day Emalia called to tell her about a mysterious pain in her lower abdomen. "I told her to go straight to the doctor," she recalled. "I also told her not to worry - and I tried not to worry, too."

No one was prepared for the news: It was stage 4 colorectal cancer.

"We were all shocked because Emalia was the pinnacle of good health" Brown said. "She immediately went into warrior mode - she fought with so much courage and grace."

After several rounds of chemotherapy and a number of surgeries, Emalia lost her battle with cancer on Feb. 10, 2014.

Brown says she lost a piece of her heart that day. "It was unimaginable pain," she said. "It's a pain that will never go away."

But Brown knew she couldn't collapse under the weight of her grief. She had to be strong for Emalia's son, Kahalakea, who was barely 3 years old when his mother passed away. "Before Emalia died, I promised her I would take care of him," Brown said.

Her grandson was surrounded by an outpouring of love, but he was still struggling to understand what happened to his mother. As a psychologist, Brown knew that the death of a parent would reverberate through the rest of his life - and she wanted to know how to help him cope with his grief.

"I wanted to learn what healthy grieving looks like for a child his age," she said. "So I took my psychology expertise and combined it with research."

That's when Brown discovered there were very few resources on Maui to help grieving family members. "I found out that the only children's bereavement resource was Queen Lili'uokalani Children's Center," she explained. "It's a wonderful program; however, it only serves children of Hawaiian ancestry."

But then she found The Dougy Center. "A friend mentioned it to me, so I Googled it," Brown said. "And I was blown away by what I read." Headquartered in Portland, Ore., and named after Dougy Turno, a 13-year-old boy who died from an inoperable brain tumor, The Dougy Center offers open-ended peer support groups to help grieving children, teens, young adults and their families cope with the loss of a loved one.

Last year, Brown flew to Portland to tour the center. The moment she stepped through the front door, she made a life-changing decision. "I knew what I had to do," she said. "There was no looking back after that."

Not long after, she founded Na Keiki O Emalia ("Emalia's Children"), a nonprofit organization that supports children and teens on Maui who are grieving the loss of a parent or sibling.

Brown serves as the organization's executive director; she expects programs to begin in early April.

Modeled after The Dougy Center, Na Keiki O Emalia will offer professionally guided peer support groups for kids ages 3 to 18 in four age brackets - "littles," "middles," "tweens" and teens - at no cost.

"I want to give kids a safe place where they can talk about the person who died, ask questions, express feelings and learn to name emotions," Brown explained. "They can deal with their own grief, while fostering new friendships with kids who understand what they are going through."

The need for an organization like Na Keiki O Emalia cannot be overstated.

"If we don't help kids work through their grief, it can lead to serious behavioral issues, substance abuse, even suicide," Brown said. "If they don't resolve their pain, there's a cost to society."

And it's not just for the kids. "We will offer much-needed support to parents and caregivers of grieving children at the time they need it the most," she explained. "I know firsthand how important these resources are."

Na Keiki O Emalia is a way of giving back to the community that gave so much to Emalia, Brown said.

"When she was sick, the support of this community was unbelievable," she said. "Emalia's illness took my understanding of 'community' to a whole new level. . . . We were immersed in a sea of love."

Through Na Keiki O Emalia, Brown says she will carry on her daughter's legacy of kindness.

"She touched so many lives and brought joy to so many hearts. She lived an ordinary life, but in an extraordinary way," she said. "Emalia's life had meaning and Na Keiki O Emalia gives her life - and her death - even more meaning."

To learn more about Na Keiki O Emalia or to make a donation, visit [www.nkoemaui.org](http://www.nkoemaui.org) or call (808) 214-9832.

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