Solidarity Stories from Asian American and Pacific Islander Community Leaders, Asian American Leaders Table

Presley Ke'alaanuhea Ah Mook Sang, Pu'uhuluhulu University

Introduction

“Everything that happened on the Mauna was because of the collective. Every single person who showed up there helped and maintained that in some way.”

In July 2019, the governor of the state of Hawai’i announced the construction of the Thirty-Meter Telescope (TMT) on Mauna Kea, a sacred site for Native Hawaiians. Many residents opposed the construction because it would desecrate a natural ecosystem that holds cultural and spiritual relevance to generations of Native Hawaiians. Harming the mountain would also be harmful to the spiritual and physical health of the people connected to the Mauna Kea.

As protesters occupied the mountain to prevent the breaking of ground, law enforcement intervened. Community members including elders persisted, risking arrest. As the days went on, Presley Ke‘alaanuhea Ah Mook Sang decided that the moment was right to create the Pu’uhuluhulu University. At the base of the mountain, Presley organized teach-ins, workshops, and classes on language, conservation, activism, and culture for the protesters and allies.

“It’s so important because it’s always bigger than the individual,” Presley said. “For a lot of Americans, it’s always about how you can benefit yourself. But for a lot of indigenous communities and minorities, it’s about the collective and making sure that everyone is okay because we cannot succeed if we don’t rely on each other.”

Takeaways

1. Solidarity is building an ecosystem.

Presley reflects that the university became a Pu'uhonua or a safe space, which cultivated a broad ecosystem. Lawyers, astronomers, historians, elders, and people across the country and throughout the Pacific came to teach from their experiences. People who had protested at Standing Rock arrived and shared their lessons from fighting the pipeline that threatened Native lands. A group of healthcare workers led by Dr. Kalamaoka'aina Niheu formed Mauna Medics to provide free healthcare. Others set up tents, provided shelter, and ran a mutual aid store.

"We had a ceremony three times a day every single day the entire time that we were up there. A big part of the ceremony, or the 'aha, was that everyone was included," Presley said. "Everyone was encouraged to be involved because that added to the intensity of the pule, or the prayers, that we were putting out."

By sharing specific chants and dances, Presley said it connected the people to the akua, the elements, to remind them of their purpose for being there. The stories, experiences, and material goods passed down and openly shared provided a foundation upon which genuine solidarity could be built and strengthened. In this way, the ecosystem included not only the people who were present, but ancestors, and the earth as a whole.

2. Organizing people power for protection.

An important aspect of the Mauna Kea movement was to build power, particularly in the face of heavy law enforcement presence. "You don't just get up and fight because that's how you feel like doing. You have to see the whole picture," Presley said. "This is also why I tried to push for the university. Because I wanted people to understand the purpose, history, and understand how we can move forward in a way similar to our ancestors."

A group called Kapu Aloha formed to create safety protocols and protect the protesters. Among the medics, there were also licensed therapists who offered free therapy sessions. As Presley describes, the Kapu Aloha were formed to practice a code of conduct called kapu aloha which means to innately trust your na'au or your gut that this is the pono, or the correct thing to do. This meant treating everyone and the space with respect and understanding that you, as an individual, are not more important than anyone else.

Many kupuna, or elders, sat in the middle of the street and others with experience facing police would stand in between law enforcement and the people. Presley said the Kapu Aloha helped remind people, "Don't give police a reason to have to escalate anything and bring out any of their tear gas, pepper spray, or any of those types of things." They also had others chained to the

Takeaways

cattle guard to ensure that the telescope machinery physically couldn't move past them.

"On July 17, 2019, law enforcement decided to actually start to arrest our elders. That's when I think the masses decided enough is enough," Presley recalled. "After our elders got arrested, we decided to form a wahine line, or a woman's line. It was terrifying but the Kapu Aloha was there to help us to remain calm throughout all of it."

3. Center the leadership of communities closest to the harm.

Throughout the Mauna Kea movement, people of many ethnic and racial backgrounds gathered to follow the leadership of Native Hawaiian peoples. This was an important solidarity practice at the Mauna Kea: to center the leadership of communities closest to the harm. "I was able to see how if people are educated in our history, and they're compassionate and good people, you start to see them sympathize in some ways because they can relate," Presley said. "There's a lot of empathy with the history that happened in Hawai'i."

For younger Hawaiians, Presley hopes to remind them that it's possible to work together, but that education and empathy are key values. "It's okay to be angry. It's okay to have these emotions, but also just be open," she added. "When we are able to teach others, we start to work together and that creates a bigger movement."

4. Understand that different communities have different strategies.

Often, certain communities might wonder why another group of people is using a particular strategy or message. Presley recalls a few social media posts comparing the Black Lives Matter movement to the Mauna Kea movement, implying that BLM protests were "riots" while Mauna Kea protests were "peaceful." Presley pushed back on these divisions. "I will follow the lead of Black individuals who are leading their movement," she insisted. "Their histories are vastly different from ours. Therefore, their ways of going about things are going to be different, and that's necessary for their movements."

Instead of comparing or dividing movements, Presley encouraged the importance of respecting the strategies and ideas of communities who know best what their solutions are in the face of oppression.

Your Turn

Your Turn

How have you built your ecosystem to do meaningful solidarity work? What roles are various individuals and groups taking on?

What's the connection between the Mauna Kea movement and other Asian American struggles?

When has popular education impacted your work? How can you create more space for that learning?

What does following the leadership of directly affected communities look like if you are not a member of those communities?

Presley describes a code of conduct for the movement - kapu aloha - which means to innately trust your na'au or your gut that this is the pono, or the correct thing to do. What are codes of conduct or community agreements that serve you in your social change work?

Some quotes in this article have been edited for clarity.