

April 11, 2008

Aloha, Auntie Nona

Winona Beamer, 84, entertained, educated and inspired generations

BY WAYNE HARADA
Advertiser Entertainment Writer

 <http://www.honoluluadvertiser.com/nonabeamer>">Post your condolences here »

Winona Beamer, the beloved matriarch of a prominent Island family of entertainers and who coined the phrase "Hawaiiana" and dedicated her life to hula, died early yesterday at the Lahaina home she shared with her singer-composer son, Keola Beamer. She was 84.

"She passed away peacefully in her sleep," said a weeping Keola Beamer from San Francisco, where he was in the midst of a concert tour that might have featured his mom were it not for her fragile health. "She was doing pretty good, but was hospitalized two weeks ago, and was happy to be home."

He learned of her death from his mom's hana'i sister, who was the principle caregiver for Auntie Nona, as she was widely known. He got the call at 3 a.m. yesterday Hawai'i time, and Beamer and his show colleagues were trying to arrange a flight home overnight or today. They will be joining family members from Honolulu to the Big Island who also were scampering for flights to Maui.

"She inspired so many young people to lead a pono (proper, upright) life," said Keola Beamer, the composer of "Honolulu City Lights," which he popularized with brother Kapono Beamer. "She was more than a mom. She was mother and father to my brother and me; my dad left the family before my brother was born, and knowing her, she'd want us to continue performing, to go on. But I just can't do that."

"She spread a lot of aloha to a lot of people so spirit will live on with the thousands and thousands of people she touched through her work, her Hawaiian, her hula," Kapono Beamer said. "She will be dearly missed but her spirit will live in many, many of us. We're grateful it was a peaceful passing and she was ready to go."

Kapono and his son, Kamana, flew to Maui yesterday to begin preparations for a private family service.

Auntie Nona was widely adored by at least two, possibly three generations of hula dancers for her Beamer-style hula, particularly to the song she composed and young students always learned: "Pupu Hinuhinu," a simple Hawaiian lullaby about a shiny shell.

She could not leave a stage without performing this cherished favorite and always earned an ovation for her simple but earnest charm.

leading by example

In earlier times, she shared the stage with her sons and until recently, had been part of Keola Beamer's Aloha Hawaiian Music and Dance Camps, held on Moloka'i. The camps explore Hawaiian culture through shared stories, songs, chants and hula.

"Auntie Nona was very encouraging to our generation — to get involved into Hawaiiana, a term she coined," said Manu Boyd, kumu hula of Halau O Ke 'A'li'i Makani and a member of the group Ho'okena, who ultimately followed her advice and got involved in his heritage. "Our families were close; she led by example; she was generous, thoughtful and kind, and she epitomized the spirit of lokomaika'i (benevolence).

"Her efforts helped bring worldwide interest in hula, so what she did has had a lasting impact on the world."

"She was a great person and a great inspiration — a foundation for me," said grandson Kamana Beamer, 30, who is carrying on the Beamer tradition in Island music — a likely nominee in this year's upcoming Na Hoku Hanohano Awards.

"Some of my best memories are when she lived in Puna," said Kamana Beamer. "She'd wake up early in the morning. We would have hot cocoa and papaya, then walk down the cliff to watch the sunrise. She always made me feel special and important — and she did that for many people, encouraging me to learn my culture and be a part of it.

"I'm going to miss her, but the thing is, she lived a great life, she accomplished a lot, and she left with dignity."

"Her passion for life ran deep, and my haumana (students) and I will forever be grateful for her aloha to us," said Maile Beamer-Loo, a hanai daughter who runs the Hula Preservation Society and relied on Beamer's longstanding guidance and aloha.

"I'm sure I speak for thousands when I say how thankful we are for her lifelong commitment to education, her dedication to the children of Hawai'i, and her desire to preserve and share our precious Hawaiian culture throughout the world."

last farewell to a friend

Paulie Jennings, executive director of E Ho'i Mai Ka Piko Hula, the World Invitational Hula Competition, on which Beamer had served as a board member, said she had one last visit with her lifelong friend last weekend.

"I saw her on Saturday," Jennings said. "She got all gussied up and put on lipstick, and I got the last picture here in my camera. She died with great dignity, she died the way she lived. She was not sad about it, she was prepared.

"Usually when I leave, she'd say 'A hui hou' (until we meet again), or something," Jennings said, but this time she said, 'Goodbye, darling.' "

Jennings said this year's hula festival, in November, will be dedicated to the late kumu hula.

Leslie Wilcox, PBS Hawai'i president and CEO, is thought to have done the last interview with Auntie Nona for her "Long Story Short With Leslie Wilcox" series of profiles on community leaders and personalities.

"She had so much depth; the conversation was extremely enjoyable and engrossing," Wilcox said. "She mentioned her health; she took a scientific approach to make the most of her life ... how much potassium to have, much water, she even rationed her poi."

Her mana'o (belief) was precise when it came to culture and what is proper.

"We taped at a beautiful Diamond Head seaside location she chose; there was a statue nearby of Hawaiian mythology figure Kamapua'a," Wilcox said. "She wanted to do the interview near the statue where the stories of her ancestors were immortalized and she did a pule, chanting, and placed lei."

Auntie Nona was famous for her celebration of Hawaiian culture at a time when speaking Hawaiian and dancing hula publicly were discouraged. Her Kamehameha Schools classmate Amelia Bailey, a master leimaker, remembered the time Beamer got in trouble with school officials for performing a standing hula during a tea for the trustees.

"But on weekends, when we had time, we would go to her mother's hula studio, near the Waikiki Theater, and dance a little bit," Bailey said.

Nona Beamer publicly challenged the authority of Kamehameha Schools' powerful trustees, which contributed to their ultimate removal in 1999.

inspired by grandmother

Auntie Nona was born in Honolulu but spent much of her childhood on the Big Island with her parents in Napo'opo'o and her grandmother, composer Helen Desha Beamer, in Hilo.

It was this "Sweetheart Grandma" who influenced and guided her, at the age of 3, to embark on the cultural and Hawaiiana path that included nearly 40 years of teaching at Kamehameha Schools. At Kamehameha, she established a curriculum embracing Hawaiian culture and supported scholarships.

Auntie Nona had a 70-year career of devoted teaching, sharing and living her culture. She was a storyteller, a chanter, a dancer, a kumu hula and an author, among other things.

Her force and dedication flourished in the community. She helped found and launch Ka Himeni Ana with businessman Richard Towill in 1983, in an effort to re-establish performance of Hawaiian language tunes in the old Hawaiian style, without amplification. The competition has opened up musical careers for such local groups as 'Alea.

She won the David Malo Award for Outstanding Hawaiian of the Year in 1987. Her musical laurels included induction to the Hawaiian Music Hall of Fame in 1974 and a Lifetime Achievement Award in 1992, part of the Na Hoku Hanohano Awards.

Auntie Nona was to be honored next week in a Pacific Business News "Women Who Mean Business" session in Honolulu.

private family services

Keola Beamer has canceled performances on his concert tour in San Francisco, Nevada City, Santa Cruz and Antioch.

He was joined by his mom in staging the Aloha Hawaiian Music and Dance Camp last Feb. 3 through 9 at Kaupoa Beach Village on Moloka'i. The event was a project of the Lahaina-based Mohala Hou Foundation, which assembles at-risk youths to join the Beamer 'ohana in sessions on hula, slack-key guitar, 'ukulele and Hawaiian storytelling. Auntie Nona would lead the "Stories and Songs of Hawai'i" segment.

It was that event that kept Beamer away from his first-time Grammy Award ceremony in Los Angeles.

Another such event had been planned for June 22 to 28 at the Kaupoa Beach Village, now shuttered due to the closure of Molokai Ranch. The event will be rescheduled at a Maui site.

"She touched the hearts of countless people," said Kaliko Beamer Trapp, a scholar born in England who befriended Auntie Nona in 1989 and became her hanai son. "She had in her mind and heart to preserve and perpetuate Hawaiian culture with everyone. It didn't matter who you are or where you come from. I was an example of that. Everyone who's ever learned from her, it's now our kuleana to perpetuate that."

Auntie Nona was also gracious, said Leah Bernstein, president of the Mountain Apple Company, which distributes CDs of her music.

"Whenever we send her a (royalty) check for what we owe her she writes in handwriting to thank us," Bernstein said. "No one else does that."

Following Auntie Nona's wishes, private family services will be held, with scattering of her ashes at the family's ranch at Waimea.

"Her directions were precise and detailed and private — and yes, there will be music," said Keola

Beamer.

Auntie Nona is survived by her sons, Keola and Kaponu Beamer; grandson, Kamana Beamer; daughters-in-law, Moanalani Beamer and Dayna Marie Dias-Beamer; hanai children, Kaliko Beamer-Trapp and Maile Beamer-Loo; and hanai sister, Kathy Templeton. In lieu of flowers, donations in Auntie Nona's memory can be made to: Mohala Hou Foundation, 843 Waine'e St., F5 865, Lahaina, HI 96761-1685
