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Hawaii News

Hula students impacted by wildfire to perform at Merrie Monarch Ho'ike

By KELSEY WALLING Hawaii Tribune-Herald | Sunday, March 31, 2024, 12:05 a.m.

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Kelsey Walling/Tribune-Herald Martha Rodillas, left, and Courtney Moylan have prepared duffle bags full of necessities like towels, pillows and toiletries for Lahainaluna High School hula students staying at the Island of Hawaii YMCA in Hilo during the Merrie Monarch Festival this week.

Fifteen hula students from Maui's Lahainaluna High School are about to take a trip of a lifetime to experience the 61st annual Merrie Monarch Festival.

The Island of Hawaii YMCA partnered with kumu hula No'eau Kalima of Halau Hula Kauluola and kumu hula Eva Palakiko of Papa Hula O Lahainaluna to gift the trip to the teenagers after the wildfires on Maui ripped through their community in August.

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THE OBVIOUS CHOICE

Due to expensive and scarce lodging options during the festival, the YMCA will house the Maui dancers for free in its multipurpose room, where they also will have access to showers and meals from the certified kitchen.

“We were told that if the students could not find a place to stay, they could not come at all, and that was not an option for us,” said Martha Rodillas, administrative office manager and Kokua Outreach director. “None of these students have experienced Merrie Monarch before, and after talking to their kumu, they are so excited. I mean, this is the Super Bowl of hula.”

Since February, Rodillas and the YMCA staff have worked tirelessly to make the week as engaging and special as possible for the Lahainaluna teens.

Fifteen girls from Palakiko’s advanced hula classes and three chaperones will be welcomed on Wednesday morning with a brunch before an exciting first day.

Festival President Luana Kawelo confirmed Papa Hula O Lahainaluna will be performing on the Merrie Monarch stage during Ho’ike.

“When I told them about Ho’ike a few days ago, they just started screaming. They are so excited,” Palakiko said. “It is truly surreal. To see this moment come to fruition for these dancers, it’s truly an honor to feel the kuleana to represent Lahainaluna, our town and our people.”

According to Palakiko, about 90% of her students have lost their homes, or their homes cannot be accessed. They have been displaced and are staying in hotels, short-term rentals or with family and friends.

While some students make it a point to come to school to feel a sense of normalcy, many students have relocated and now live across the island or have additional responsibilities, which makes it more difficult to keep up with grades and attendance.

“It’s still a daily struggle. It’s been eight months, but it’s still as if it just happened. This trip gives the papa hula class an opportunity to disconnect from it all,” Palakiko said. “My students, when they dance hula, it puts them in a different zone. It’s not any typical dance. They connect spiritually and culturally to the core of who they are.”

Along with Ho’ike, Lahainaluna will be able to sit in the halau section for the Miss Aloha Hula competition on Thursday night and Hula Kahiko on Friday. On Saturday, they will watch Hula ‘Auana and the results on the YMCA’s big screen.

On Thursday, the students will spend the morning with Halau Hula Kauluola at Kamehameha Schools Hawaii before a campus tour of the University of Hawaii at Hilo. The girls will have their second performance of the week at noon on the UH-Hilo Library Lanai. They will head back to the YMCA in the afternoon to help decorate the organization's float for the Merrie Monarch Royal Parade before Miss Aloha Hula.

Their final performance will be at 10:30 a.m. on Friday at the SCP Hilo Hotel. After lunch, they will go to the craft fair for a couple hours before getting ready for Kahiko night.

On Saturday, the Lahainaluna group will say "aloha" to Hilo as they participate in the Royal Parade on the YMCA's float.

"They are getting the full experience of Merrie Monarch with their performances, the craft fair, the parade and competition," Rodillas said. "We're so excited to welcome them to Hilo and grateful so many people in the community have come together for them."

After deciding to house the students, the YMCA administration sought grant funding to cover large expenses that would make their stay more comfortable and convenient.

The Hawaii Community Foundation activated the Maui Strong Fund and granted the YMCA about \$8,850, which covers ground transportation, fuel, meals, incidentals, as well as toiletries, blankets, pillows and other necessities.

"These kids have been displaced, and many of them are in transit. We didn't want them to have to worry about bringing a towel, a pillow, toiletries and other things," Rodillas said. "We packed each student a duffel bag with their own personal luggage tag with all the things they may need, so they can take them home after the festival."

One of the conditions of the grant requires the YMCA do a mental health and wellness check with the students, so Rodillas made gratitude journals where they can write how they are feeling each day.

The YMCA will collect the data and share with the foundation how its funding made an impact.

The YMCA also held a fundraiser and asked its members to donate.

"Lo and behold, in less than five days, we got a whole slew of donations," Rodillas said. "Those donations will be going to a surprise gift that the students can use to enhance their Merrie Monarch experience."

While the students stay at the YMCA, the gym will be open during its normal hours. However, a portion of the gym and the showers will be closed to members, and all fitness classes are cancelled from Wednesday through Sunday.

Rodillas said some members of the organization provided more than monetary donations.

Donald Saltiban, owner of Saltigear Lemonade, is giving a large amount of lemonade for the students to enjoy, and the YMCA's hula class has planned to provide fresh fruits for breakfasts.

"The blessings are pouring in and it's amazing. We're still in shock, and we're not even there yet," Palakiko said. "Come (Merrie Monarch) week, I don't know how we'll be able to function. We are humbled, grateful and just in awe of the aloha that has been given to us.

"This will give them energy to finish the school year strong, move forward, build resiliency and the grit to know everything will be OK."