

**Davianna Pōmaika'i McGregor
P.O. Box 48
Kaunakakai, HI 96748**

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Contact: Davianna Pōmaika'i McGregor (808) 222 – 9728
Hayden Aluli (808) 294 - 3388

Dr. Noa Emmett Auwae Aluli: A Lifetime of Commitment, A Legacy For Generations

Dr. Noa Emmett Auwae Aluli has passed, leaving a visionary legacy for generations to pick up and carry.

Born on O‘ahu, in 1944, and raised in Kailua, he graduated from St. Louis High School, Marquette University in Wisconsin, and was in the first class of medical doctors from the University of Hawai‘i John A. Burns School of Medicine. After a family health residency on Moloka‘i in 1975, Dr. Aluli began a 46-year practice as Kauka (doctor) at the Moloka‘i Family Health Center in 1976. His life partner is Davianna McGregor.

He pioneered a distinctively Native Hawaiian approach to health care in rural Hawaiian communities that he modeled for medical students whom he mentored. He believed that the health and well-being of each patient needed to be understood in the context of their ‘ohana, their genealogy, their lifestyle, and their ‘āina. He emphasized specialized care of the kūpuna, even making home visits. Filling a desperate need, he facilitated the opening of the Moloka‘i Dialysis Center, raised \$17 M to upgrade the trauma unit, and install a CAT scan machine at Moloka‘i General Hospital to more effectively serve the island.

To address excessive rates of diabetes, heart disease, and obesity on Moloka‘i, he turned to the kūpuna who helped develop a traditional foods diet from the ‘āina that effectively reduced the risk factors of those who participated in the Moloka‘i Heart Study. His Moloka‘i patients changed their diet because of this study and the importance of traditional Hawaiian food diets spread to other communities in Hawai‘i, such as Wai‘anae.

Kauka initiated community-based participatory research on Moloka‘i rooted in the belief that communities should own their own data and manage their own health care, laying the groundwork for Indigenous health data sovereignty in Hawai‘i. This desire to empower community health, led him to help draft federal legislation that set up the Native Health Care System, Papa Ola Lōkahi, and on Moloka‘i, Nā Pu‘uwai.

Seeing the need to create professional support networks, Kauka helped to found the Ahahui O Nā Kauka (Native Hawaiian Physicians Association) which is also part of the international Pacific Region Indigenous Doctors Congress.

With the motto of “The health of the land, is the health of our people, is the health of our nation,” Dr. Aluli also worked to protect the traditional Hawaiian subsistence way of life by organizing for access rights through Moloka‘i Ranch to the ocean and as part of the Hui Ala Loa (Group of the Long Trails). Hui Ala Loa also stopped the development of a prominent landmark, Kaiaka Rock, and a fishing ko‘a (shrine) and house sites at Kawakiunui on the West End, village complexes, and a pu‘uhonua at Kawela and the Pūko‘o fishpond on the East End of Moloka‘i.

Dr. Aluli’s most outstanding legacy marked a historic turning point for Native Hawaiians and Hawai‘i Nei and served as a catalyst for a Hawaiian cultural renaissance, the founding of the Protect Kaho‘olawe

‘Ohana. The ‘Ohana led the Aloha ‘Āina movement that stopped 50 years of bombing and military training exercises that desecrated the sacred island of Kaho‘olawe. Dr. Aluli served on the congressional Kaho‘olawe Island Conveyance Commission which provided for the island to be returned to the people of Hawai‘i in May 1994. The U.S. Navy conducted a massive cleanup of ordnances on the island. Dr. Aluli was instrumental in crafting the state law mandating that the state hold the island in trust for eventual transfer to the sovereign Hawaiian entity. As part of championing this transfer, Dr. Aluli participated in the drafting of a constitution to re-establish the Native Hawaiian nation as a delegate to the ‘Aha 2016 Hawaiian Constitutional Convention. It awaits ratification.

With the spiritual guidance of the Edith Kanaka‘ole Foundation, Dr. Aluli and the ‘Ohana revived Native Hawaiian cultural and spiritual practices and ceremonies, most prominently, the annual Makahiki ceremony which is now celebrated throughout the islands.

Dr. Aluli touched the hearts of thousands with his generosity, kindness, and aloha. He inspired generations of Hawaiians to stand up and be heard. A new generation is stepping up to lead the ‘Ohana. He now leaves a big gap in health care for the island of Moloka‘i that can hopefully be filled from among those he mentored

In his words: “We commit for generations, not just for careers. We set things up now so that they’ll be carried on. We look ahead together so that many of us share the same vision and dream. To our next generations we say, Go with the spirit. Take the challenge. Learn something. Give back.”

