

2024 Summer Overseas Reflection

“Beyond the Beach: My Overseas Reflection”



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September 1, 2024

When I tell people that I spent one whole month of my summer in Hawaii, the reaction I get is often along the lines of “lucky you, the sun, beach and food must have been amazing!” Although I certainly thoroughly enjoyed sunbathing, boogie-boarding, and eating poke, my experience was so much more than the stereotypical ideas people have about Hawaii. With this reflection, I am excited to share some of my distinctly Hawaiian experiences and hopefully expand the expectation of what “Island Style” looks like.

In this reflection, I write about 4 extremely memorable events beyond my research that showcase some incredibly unique culture, and my involvement as an ambassador for the Laidlaw Program.

Cheryl and Bill

Before I even landed on Maui, I had an overnight layover in Seattle. After boarding my plane at 7 in the morning, I found myself placed next to an older couple. Before I even sat down, the older gentleman made a remark about how I was “one tall fella.” I flashed them a quick smile sat down and tried to get comfortable. Not much later, the woman struck up a conversation with me. I learned that their names were Bill and Cheryl, they were in their late 60s and lived a few hours outside of Seattle in a town called Bellingham. They shared that they were flying to Maui to go to their condo which they visit every summer. I then had an opportunity to share about myself and what I was hoping to accomplish in the next month while in Maui. Cheryl was fascinated by this opportunity I had and encouraged me saying that there is so much to find in my research. She shared that the year before, she and Bill had narrowly missed the outbreak of the Lahaina fire and left the day before under a power outage and heavy turbulence. The rest of the flight, Cheryl and Bill were extremely kind and offered me fresh fruit and snacks that they had packed. Their warmth and the stories they shared not only provided a delightful start to my trip but also inspired me to embrace the upcoming challenges with enthusiasm. The encouragement from Cheryl, in particular, resonated with me—she was genuinely fascinated by the research opportunity awaiting me and urged me to explore deeply. Their kindness and the insights from their experiences enriched my understanding of the resilient spirit of people facing adversity. Energized by our conversation, I looked forward to initiating my research and engaging with more individuals like them.

Living Way Maui

Bill and Cheryl were in Maui to stay in their gated community and enjoy the beach every day. Although they were the kindest people, I did not want to share that experience with them. Going into this research endeavour, my goal was to look beyond the superficial narratives I knew about Hawaii and fully immerse myself in an authentic local experience whatever it may be. Despite looking the part, this would not have been possible without meeting and befriending some true locals. Luckily for me on the first day I arrived, I crossed paths with my people. Upon arriving, at the Kahului airport, I called an Uber to take me to the house where I’d be staying. I

was instructed to enter through the garage, however, the door to the house was still locked and the landlord was at work. After considering my options, I decided to take a stroll around the neighbourhood I would call home for the next four weeks. As I turned the first corner, an open door caught my eye. Inside were several aunties sweeping the floor while listening to music and chatting it up. I felt a deep internal stir to take a chance and talk to them. I walked in, introduced myself and asked them what they were up to and what this building was. I came to learn that it was a church/community center named Living Way that was open nearly 24/7 as a resource for the community. I also learned that the place that I decided to stay was actually considered the ghetto of Maui with lots of drugs, violence, and poverty. People from within the community volunteer their time and labour to help this place run. Immediately, I was asked if I was hungry or thirsty and offered food and water. I began to “talk story” with the aunties and was so encouraged to hear their enthusiasm for my research. I gave them my number and decided to return home and unpack my things.

Little did I know the next 4 weeks straight, I would nearly spend every day with the people at this community center. The next day I met some of the other volunteers who all lived at the church. One was a boy just two years younger than me and another was only a couple years older. We immediately got to talking and connected so well. For the next month, we would hang out constantly and they took me all over the island to visit exclusive spots that would take your breath away. They took me cliff jumping and hiking and swimming under waterfalls. I also got to jam music with them and slowly became a fan of the Hawaiian reggae they would play all the time. As we hung out, they started to teach me how to speak pidgin and all the slang I would need to get by as a local. On Wednesday nights, they invited me to their sacred session of practicing Ha’a (Hawaiian Haka) for the young men of the church. I had the incredible honour of learning from them and performing Ha’a in reverence of the history behind it. The leisurely time was a small fraction of the total time I spent with Living Way. The majority of the time, I became just like everyone else. I helped in any way I could by cooking, cleaning, delivering meals, fundraising, taking care of kids etc. Every morning, I would show up and jump right into the kitchen peeling potatoes, cutting vegetables, or doing whatever else needed to be done. On Mondays and Thursdays, after the meals were made, I would tag along with a brother named Conrad and drive across the island delivering these hot meals to those who needed it. Many people from around the neighborhood would show up throughout the day and we would assemble food boxes for them with things from the pantry and send them on their way.

Throughout the month, Living Way ran many fundraisers which are the only way they can keep doing what they do. The first was a sale of lau lau plates which are pork and other stuffings inside steamed taro leaf. I tried to assist the best I could in making the laulaus and tried to absorb as much new information as possible. The second fundraiser was door-to-door sales in the neighbourhood of fruit jams and gummies that were made in-house. With a group of 5 young men, we went into the neighbourhood, knocking on doors, chatting with the residents, and

selling. Having done many fundraisers in the past, I could not believe how quickly these items were selling out, especially in the most expensive state in America. Nearly every house that answered purchased something and everyone we encountered was beyond kind.

Throughout the month, I quickly became acquainted with the many keiki (kids) that would always hang around the church. Nearly every day there was some kind of programming for them, and I was often there taking care of them when really we were just hanging out and having fun. I immediately began to form deep relationships with many of them and began to understand them, their families, and their situations. Nearly all the people I met would be at the community center 4-5 days a week they would bring their families and the entire place felt like one huge family. They all lived in or around the church and were all low-income living off the government and multiple jobs. Despite all this, I have never met such a joyful and loving group of people. In the last week of the month, the church decided to run a 3-day summer day camp for the kids and asked me to help organize it knowing my history of being a camp counsellor. I happily obliged and was able to run a phenomenal camp for the kids of the neighbourhood in a park nearby for over 40 kids. Through this, I was able to exercise my leadership and organization skills which I have been refining throughout the years.

The stories I included in this segment are only a few of the incredible memories I formed with Living Way Maui and only some of the incredible impact I was able to have. I truly feel as though these people are family and I am their hanai (adopted) son. It has been the most incredible honour of a lifetime to meet, befriend, and work alongside them for a whole month. Throughout my time with them, I undoubtedly achieved my goal of having a truly local experience and absolutely immersed myself in the culture from ancient traditions to modern customs.

Thomas Blamey

Halfway through my time on Maui, I scheduled an enlightening early morning interview with a scholar at the University of Hawaii Maui Campus. Although the academic discussion was enriching, the highlight of my day unfolded unexpectedly afterward.

Stepping outside into the sunny warmth post-interview, the sounds of children playing drew my attention to a nearby grassy area where a volleyball net was set up. Curious, I approached and met Thomas, a math professor overseeing a lively game among middle schoolers. He explained they were part of a Verizon-funded summer STEM camp, and today, having some downtime while waiting for their projects, they were enjoying some outdoor fun.

Thomas and I struck up a conversation, and he kindly introduced me to the university chancellor and some of the camp volunteers, two of whom were university students from California whom

he had mentored since their childhood. He invited me to join them for lunch in the cafeteria, where I enjoyed delicious meals prepared by the school chef and spent the rest of the day playing outside with the campers.

Another strange moment was discovering a martial arts station set up by Thomas, a Tae Kwon Do enthusiast. It had been years since I practiced after earning my blackbelt, but I was thrilled to demonstrate and teach the kids some moves, even helping them break boards. This unexpected return to a past hobby rejuvenated a part of my identity I had nearly forgotten.

A couple of days later, Thomas, having obtained my email from the scholar I interviewed, invited me to a dinner on Maui's west side with the family of two volunteers I had met. The evening was filled with engaging conversations, where I learned about the diverse backgrounds of the family members, from law and real estate to athletics. Thomas, sharing stories from his own life, including his wife's Olympic past and his Tae Kwon Do teaching in San Diego, enriched our dialogue further.

As we drove back from a delightful night that included a stop at an ice cream shop, Thomas and I discussed my career aspirations. He offered invaluable advice about the teaching profession in Hawaii, suggesting it might be an accessible path should I ever consider it. This conversation, filled with personal stories and professional guidance, encapsulated the unexpected and enriching experiences that marked my research trip in Maui.

Kupono and Ashley Kong

Two days before my departure from Maui, a surprising invitation came from my friend Koa at the church. Awakened from a restful Sunday nap, I received a text urging me to dress up and join him for a wedding. Scrambling into the only formal outfit I had, I hurried to the church, where we prepared to celebrate the union of Kupono and Ashley Kong.

On our drive to the venue, I assisted in finishing touches by tying the ropes of new Koi wood necklaces, gifts for the couple. We were invited not just as guests but as participants; the groom, a son of one of the church elders, had requested we perform Ha'a—a traditional Hawaiian war dance—at the end of the ceremony to symbolize overcoming marital challenges.

The wedding took place at a stunning coastal resort in Kihei, owned by Kupono's grandmother. The setting was idyllic, from the perfect weather to the exquisite décor. After the vows, I joined other boys in performing Ha'a, marking a powerful moment that transitioned smoothly into a lively reception.

During the reception, I took on the role of serving food, greeting each guest with a big smile. The evening was filled with heartfelt toasts, captivating hula performances, and engaging conversations. I learned that Ashley hailed from a small town in Alberta—coincidentally, not far from my hometown of Edmonton. I got to chat a little bit with Ashley’s father and a bunch of other guests, and although I came into the wedding as a stranger to the couple, by the end I truly felt like a member of this huge family.

Reflection

The stories above are just 4 of the exceptionally memorable events that happened outside of my research that display the unique culture of Hawaii. So much more happened in the day-to-day that I wasn't able to capture on paper. Although these stories may seem like mere coincidences and irrelevant, I believe they speak to an important lesson of what makes for a successful global citizen. None of these opportunities would have been possible without confidence, openness, and respect. Without taking the initiative of being friendly, candid, and unashamed, none of these incredible experiences and interactions would have come about. Although I could’ve potentially buried my head in my research, because of my willingness to be open and meet new people and experiences head-on, my time spent was much richer. As you can probably tell, my fond memories of my month in Maui are not about the beaches, mountains, or ocean. The spirit of Hawaii or “Island Style” is not about the island but about the people. It was the people who welcomed me so warmly and allowed me to share a table with them. They were the ones who invited me to participate and learn about traditions I never would've experienced otherwise. I owe it all to them for making my time what it was which can only be described as amazing. Although my experience was probably easier than others considering how well my personality aligns with Hawaiian culture and especially because I could pass as a local, It took a lot of independence and trust in myself to be truly unreserved and not fall into comfortable habits. Being in the middle of the Pacific alone is definitely a daunting task and was a great way to refine some of the important skills I have been developing as a leader and global citizen. I could not imagine a better and more wonderful opportunity.