

here's hawai'i

By Jocelyn Fujii



Global Healing Center



Brett Uprichard

The Lawa'i International Center on Kaua'i will be a multicultural, nondenominational place of peace and healing.

Leading the effort to build the Lawa'i International Center are (seated) Takano Nonaka; (behind her, left to right) her son Iwao Nonaka; Gloria Nakea, a director of the center; Lynn Muramoto, president; and Mark Hubbard, vice president and a director of the center.

Takano Nonaka came to Kaua'i with one suitcase and a heart full of hope. She arrived in 1921 from Japan, settled with her husband in Hanapēpē and raised 10 children, seven of them boys. When World War II and the Korean War called four of her sons into service, she went to her place of comfort, a Shingon Buddhist temple tucked away in a valley named Lawa'i. From each one of the 88 shrines that snake up the steep, hillside, she took a pinch of the earth and placed it into four Bull Durham tobacco pouches. She pinned a pouch on each of her departing sons and promised that when they returned, they would take the soil back to its source.

One by one, her sons returned. Pouch by pouch, they returned the soil to Lawa'i. Grandma is 97 years old now, stooped with age, radiant with peace. She has visited the site regularly for 60 years. Through decades of neglect, when the shrines were abandoned, overgrown, she never stopped visiting. "Cannot see, but get power over there," she says hands clasped.

Iwao, her 75-year-old son, takes her there without fail. Last August, the Nonakas were among a diverse group that gathered there to celebrate a new beginning: the nonprofit Lawa'i International Center (www.lawaicenter.org, (808)639-4300), a humanitarian effort that will become an international, multicultural, and nondenominational center for those seeking peace and healing. "This has always been a natural place of healing," explains Lynn Muramoto, president of the organization. "In the earliest days in this valley, there was a *heiau* [temple] where the Hawaiians brought their wounded and sick to heal." As the immigrant groups arrived for the plantations, they too came for nurturance. They built Taoist and Shinto temples, and in 1904, the 88 shrines on the hillside with their figures of stone and wood.

But when the minister died, the temple languished and activities ceased for all but a few stalwarts. The 32-acre complex, the only one of its kind outside of Japan, is an archaeological and cultural treasure, a miniature replication of 88 shrines of Shikoku, Japan, built along a 1,000 mile long trail established more than 1,000 years ago. Despite these origins Muramoto stresses that this will not be a religious or a Buddhist center, but a globally inclusive destination where people of diverse interests, ethnicities and cultures can gather.

A broad spectrum of volunteers from the mainland and Hawai'i has appeared out of nowhere. Supporters sell beef stew, malasadas, mango seed and orchids to raise money year-round. "Angels" have stepped forward with large donations to "honor a shrine" in the name of their loved ones and help pay the \$250,000 mortgage, miraculously reduced from its original \$6 million asking price. Kaua'i Boy Scouts Troop 83 comes twice a month to clear and clean. Plans call for a gathering pavilion and learning center for education and the arts, guest cottages, sweeping paths for reflective walks, and, all around, the beauty of a valley that has long been a refuge.

Sharon Masuoka tells a story of their great-grandfather who, in 1917, walked 28 miles from Kapa'a to Lawa'i to pray at the shrines for this daughter's arrival. Unable to afford shoes, he walked barefoot. That same day in Japan, after repeatedly failing a physical exam because of her glass eye, his daughter poised to leap into the ocean in desperation, finally received her passport. Like Takano Nonaka after her, she came to Kaua'i and set down roots for the generations to follow, "Get power over there," says Nonaka.

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