

50 STATES, 50 FIXES

## At This Clinic in Hawaii, Nature Is the Medicine

By Cara Buckley Photographs and Video by Marie Eriel Hobro

The air is filled with birdsong, the land a tableau of soft greens and gentle light. This is Ho'oulu 'Āina, a 100-acre preserve with an unusual twist. Linked to a community health center, it is a place where patients come to heal the land, and themselves.

As climate change accelerates and the Trump administration abandons the fight, Ho'oulu 'Āina is one example of how people in all 50 states, red and blue, are working to restore land, clean up waterways, cut pollution and protect wildlife.

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**50 States, 50 Fixes** is a [series about local solutions](#) to environmental problems. More to come this year.

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Twenty years ago, Ho'oulu 'Āina was neglected, overrun with garbage and invasive plants. But today, it's thriving.

And the volunteers and patients who spend long hours there, removing nonnative plants and growing vegetables, fruit and herbs, have experienced a restoration of body and soul.

There is [growing research](#) that shows how spending time in nature can improve mental, physical and cognitive health, something that the stewards of Ho'oulu 'Āina have seen firsthand.

Older people once dependent on canes and walkers have regained some mobility. Diabetics have seen their glucose levels drop. Depressed teens have grown bright-eyed. In Hawaiian, the name Ho'oulu 'Āina means "to grow because of the land," and they have.



"Many people within the health center saw the land as a means to improve human health, sort of a tool," said Puni Jackson, the program director at Ho'oulu 'Āina. But for Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders, who make up a majority of patients at the clinic, the connection to nature is familial and profound, Ms. Jackson said. "It's a sacred relationship," she said.

Ho'oulu 'Āina is a 10-minute drive from the clinic, off a thicketed road, over a wooden bridge and up a steep dirt driveway that leads to grassy fields bordered by forest. The land has breadfruit, koa and banana trees, medicinal plants and taro, organic gardens, low-slung buildings, and a tiny apothecary where Ms. Jackson, who is also a native Hawaiian medicine practitioner, sees patients.



Puni Jackson, the program director at Ho'oulu 'Āina.



Young Acacia koa trees along a pathway in Ho'oulu 'Āina.

Will White, who works at a local nonprofit, said whenever he, his wife and his young son volunteer there, they leave with a sense of invigoration and deep peace. "What we're feeling is mana, that energy, or that life force, of all living things in Hawaiian culture," he said. "It's the forest, it's the soil, it's the rain, it's the people. It's this sort of magic mix."

The roots of Ho'oulu 'Āina can be traced to the late 1980s, when a young doctor named David Derauf arrived in Honolulu from Minnesota to take a job at the Kōkua Kalihi Valley health center.

The center largely serves patients who rely on Medicare or pay on a sliding scale. Dr. Derauf began noticing that whether they were diabetic or arthritic, strapping and young or slowed by age, many shared a similar ailment: a sense of dislocation from the natural world, which had long ago been taken over for plantations, military bases, expensive hotels, cities and sprawl.

"Their culture, their identity, their health really relied on that ancient connection to land," said Dr. Derauf, now the center's chief executive.

He also noticed a trend among patients who'd grown up in rural



areas. When they reminisced about their younger days, spent growing food and harvesting medicinal plants in their communities, they'd sit up straighter, enlivened.

"Their spirit in the room would just shift," said Dr. Derauf, who still practices medicine. "I realized there's something here that we need to be doing differently."



The community garden at Ho'oulu 'Āina.

Kōkua Kalihi Valley offers medical, behavioral and dental care, as well as outreach programs like a bike exchange, and is funded in large part by philanthropic and charitable foundations, private donors and a small amount of federal and state support. In the early 2000s, at the urging of his patients and people in the community, Dr. Derauf and his colleagues began looking for land where patients could garden.

In the meantime, deeper in the valley, the land that would become Ho'oulu 'Āina wasn't doing so well. It was part illegal dump and part jungle, a tangle of nonnative plants and rusted-out cars. Decades earlier, it had been used as a nursery, its earth mined for potting soil and planted with exotic species that eventually ran riot. Next, it was slated to become luxury housing, until that plan failed. In the 1970s, as native Hawaiians reclaimed their language and culture, a group devoted to the local custom of wild pig hunting joined with a family of postal workers to successfully push for the land to be conserved. But there was no funding, and by the 2000s, the site was choked with refuse, home to strung-out drifters, and had a menacing air that frightened local children.

In 2005, the state agreed to lease the land to the health center, and the slow, steady process of restoration began.

From the start, there were auspicious signs. Among the first volunteers to show up to tackle the debris was a group of older Japanese and Chinese men from the local Lions Club. So did young Samoans and Pacific Islanders who lived in public housing, where gangs were rife. "Here were these two groups that had never had anything to do with each other, other than distrust," Dr. Derauf recalled. But by day's end, he said, "you could hear these older men



required. But by day 3 and, he said, you could hear these kids not going, 'Hey, these kids, not so bad.'"



Children washed turmeric at the preserve.

The first patient Dr. Derauf brought to the preserve turned to him after arriving and announced, "I'm home." A group of seniors, all diabetics, came to weed and plant. In the exam room, they had appeared frail and elderly. But in the preserve, they sang and laughed as they swung machetes, Dr. Derauf said. Later, they proudly brought food they had grown home to their families. Their blood pressure, glucose levels and other health indicators improved, he said.

The land grew healthier. Invasive vegetation was replaced with native trees and plants. Food grown in the organic gardens was distributed in the community. Outside advice that ran contrary to traditional native practices, such as using herbicides, was disregarded, and nonnative trees were often kept standing, or later carved into canoes.

"At the root of it is respect for living things and respect for systems," said Heather McMillen, an urban and community forester at the Hawaii Department of Land and Natural Resources. In 2022, she nominated Ms. Jackson for a National Association of State Foresters leadership award, which Ms. Jackson won.

One recent sunlit day, a group of schoolchildren visited the preserve. After singing a chant in Hawaiian, they picked and rinsed baskets of native turmeric, carefully arraying the stubby orange roots on a picnic table to dry. In the apothecary, Ms. Jackson tended to a family reeling from a miscarriage. In the late afternoon, staff, volunteers and their children began gathering to tell stories and drink 'awa, or kava, a traditional medicinal drink.

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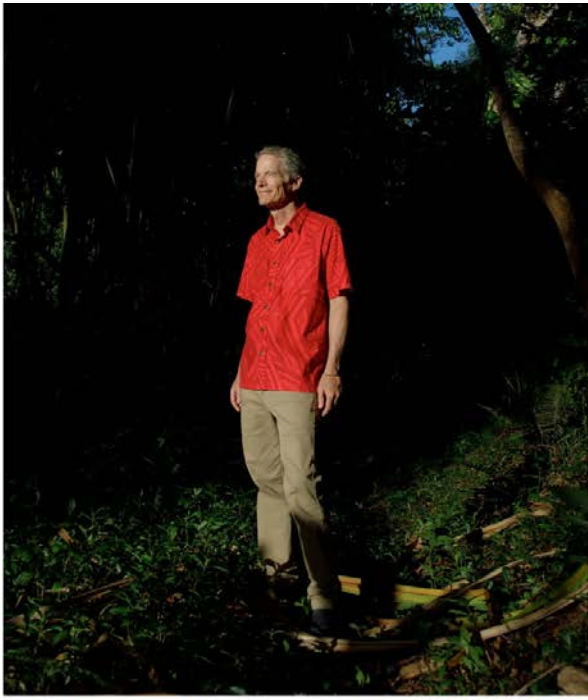


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Dr. David Derauf, the Kokua Kalihi Valley health center chief executive. "I realized there's something here that we need to be doing differently," he said.



Scott Garlough, the operations manager at Ho'oulu 'Āina. "It's the land that actually does the teaching," he said.

Among them was Scott Garlough, 58, who was hired at Ho'oulu 'Āina in 2011, after volunteering there. He'd had a painful past; his mother died when he was 13, after she spent time in prison. "My whole existence was just pain and trauma, and this was the first place that I felt any type of healing taking place," said Mr. Garlough, who's the operations manager. His job includes bringing fourth graders into the forest to pull weeds and plant native taro, bananas and sweet potatoes for next year's batch of fourth graders to harvest.

"That one little move takes them out of the 'me, me,' and puts it into the village," Mr. Garlough said. "It's the land that actually does the teaching."

As people drank 'awa, a woman began playing ukulele, and two children sang along. Dusk fell, the birds quieted, and all around, the trees and the mountains were folded into the night.

"We're all part of the cycle that is the land," Mr. Garlough said. "We forget that, you know. We think man is No. 1. But we can't even breathe oxygen unless the planet exhales."