



The Ones Who Stayed

Story by Shannon Wianecki

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Kristin Hettermann was lost and out of gas when she spotted Dennis Kaaihue alongside the road in Ke‘anae. She was visiting from Charleston, South Carolina, and had underestimated the spectacular remoteness of the Hana Highway, the circuitous route that leads ever deeper into the East Maui rainforest. She asked Kaaihue directions to the nearest filling station. The Hawaiian farmer smiled. In his unhurried, generous way, he produced a gascan and filled her tank.

Back home Hettermann sent her roadside angel a thank-you gift. The two began a regular correspondence. Kaaihue wrote of his dream to cultivate a farm and cultural center on his family land, where visitors could experience authentic Hawai‘i. He invited Hettermann back, adopting her as his hanai daughter. The 30-year-old Charleston socialite loved her action-packed city life, but as Kaaihue described the peaceful, healing powers of his land, she felt a magnet in her chest tugging her back to the Islands.

Exactly one year from the day she ran out of gas, Hettermann returned to Ke‘anae with two suitcases and an empty day-planner. She’d left behind a dynamic marketing career and real estate investments. How would she make a living here? Tradewinds blew unimpeded through the glassless windows in Kaaihue’s house, her temporary shelter. Lying in her small bed that night, listening to geckos’ territorial clicks as they snapped up moths, Hettermann wondered whether she had made a terrible mistake.

Hawai‘i’s first residents — Kaaihue’s ancestors — sailed here at least a thousand years ago, most likely from the Marquesas. Upon making landfall on the planet’s most isolated archipelago, they adapted to its unique parameters. Many hundreds of years later European and American ships arrived carrying whalers, traders, botanists and missionaries. Next came waves of hardworking immigrants from China, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Portugal and Puerto Rico. They each came with their baggage—good and bad—and transformed Hawai‘i as it transformed them.

Nowadays the dream of moving to Hawai‘i is nearly universal. But the adventurous few who do are in fact outnumbered by those who move away. According to the US Census, in 2011 57,542 people migrated from the Mainland to Hawai‘i, while 61,940 packed up and left. That’s a net loss of 4,398 residents—and it’s not an anomaly. In the 1990s Hawai‘i led the nation in per capita loss due to migration. Why do people leave paradise? Ask those exiting and you’ll get an earful: \$9 gallons of milk, pterodactyl-size cockroaches, poorly rated public schools, volcanic smog, insanely priced beach shacks. Often it boils down to two simple facts: They can’t find a job and they miss family elsewhere.

Everybody’s heard horror stories of failed attempts. One poor fellow didn’t make it past Honolulu Airport: Thieves at baggage claim relieved him of his worldly possessions. Without cash or identification, he couldn’t even retrieve his dog from quarantine. The Hollands’ tale is especially

unfortunate. They built their dream home on Baldwin Beach on Maui, only to have it condemned before they could move in. It seems that the county improperly authorized building permits and later rescinded them. The Hollands endured years of litigation before surrendering their property for half of its market value. Would you blame these would-be residents for interpreting “aloha” as “goodbye”?

The Hawaiian Islands, still molten and rife with temperamental deities, seem to accept some people and spit others out. If you're f.o.b. (fresh off the boat), locals are hesitant to hire you, rent to you or date you until you've survived six months, preferably more. It's too risky; you probably won't stick around. So who makes the cut and why? How does a malahini (newcomer) become a kama'aina (child of the land)? A survey of a few longtime residents reveals that it has little to do with luck.

Delorese Gregoire is the spring-loaded, vivacious founder of Winner's Camp, a leadership academy for teens on O'ahu. Her cellphone ringtone, “Celebration” by Kool & the Gang, gives little hint of her hard-knock background. Born in 1946 in Salem, Massachusetts, she boomeranged from one abusive foster home to another—thirteen, all told. The first time she saw television, she was in a hospital: eight years old and mesmerized by images of Hawaiian landscapes flashing on the screen.

From that moment she had a mission. “I told myself, ‘I'm getting out of this hellhole and going to Hawai'i,’” she says. She took every available job, from janitor to secretary to soda jerk. “When you grow up in the ghetto on the East Coast,” she says, summoning a New Englander's nasal accent, “everybody is like, ‘Yeah, right. Hawai'i? Are you kidding?’” But by her eighteenth birthday, Gregoire had socked away \$900, enough for a one-way ticket on American Airlines.

The teen boarded the plane with no connections and no plan—only chutzpah and a desire to finally be the author of her life's script. When the wheels touched down in Honolulu, she says, “I felt chicken skin. I felt like I had finally come home.” Concerned that she had no place to go upon arrival, the flight attendants adopted her. She stayed at their hotel for a few days before finding her own place.

With brown hair down to her hips and a newly acquired tan, the petite East Coaster fit right in amid the Waikiki throngs. It was 1964. Hawai'i had recently become a state, and large new aircraft had shortened the travel time between the Islands and the West Coast from eleven hours to six. This made the Islands more attractive to many Mainlanders. Gregoire landed a cocktail shift at the Tahitian Lanai. The swanky restaurant catered to servicemen on R&R and vacationing celebrities, including Marlon Brando and Prince Charles. The owner took an instant liking to his unflappable new recruit, who kept her cool even when a customer knocked her and a full tray of food into the pool.

Gregoire found that earning her coworkers' respect took a little longer. “One girl was a real tita,” she laughs, using the term for a tough local girl. “After a few months, once she learned that I wasn't just a privileged kid, she befriended me.” Lydia Hansen, a tall beauty from a large Chinese-Hawaiian family, introduced the short, spunky haole to her parents, who immediately absorbed her into the fold. Hansen later asked Gregoire to be godmother to her children. “It was the first time I felt love,” says Gregoire. “I was so appreciative. If I hadn't come to Hawai'i, I'm not sure I'd be alive.”

In the midst of the psychedelic '60s, a young waitress with plenty of cash and no supervision could've disappeared down a path of debauchery. Instead Gregoire dived into the local culture: paddling outrigger canoes with the Waikiki beach boys and enrolling in ocean science and Hawaiiana classes at the University of Hawai'i. At the college she taught Japanese nationals

conversational English. Her innovative, confidence-building methods became the basis for the Hawai'i English Language Program and the university's first English as a Second Language degree.

In 1985 Gregoire launched Winner's Camp, a week-long motivational retreat for teens. Campers tackle ropes courses and attend workshops in etiquette and public speaking—skills Gregoire worked hard to develop as an adult. The nonprofit program has received national recognition and produced fourteen thousand graduates. Thirteen years ago Winner's Camp found a permanent home on Kamehame Ridge. The abandoned Army barracks overlooking Hawai'i Kai were a disaster. Graffiti covered every surface that wasn't smashed or rusted through. The challenge of renovating the dilapidated kitchen and dorms didn't dissuade Gregoire in the slightest. Today they're clean, cozy and wallpapered with inspirational quotes of her own invention.

Jim Loomis was slightly more prepared than Gregoire when he relocated from Connecticut to O'ahu in 1962. In his pocket the 25-year-old had enough money for three months and a local's phone number. He also had a wife and baby in tow—that much more pressure to swim, not sink, in these new waters. Like so many émigrés Loomis wanted to put some distance between himself and his family back East. His wife didn't get along with them. But by day two he realized with a jolt just how far away he was from home. Everything felt foreign.

"It was a lot different for an East Coast haole back then," he says. "You had to work at assimilating, really work at learning to pronounce Hawaiian names, eat with chopsticks and get to know people." Still, he says, "I loved everything about it. I wanted to assimilate."

He dialed up his only Hawai'i contact: a former Connecticut resident named Frank Fasi. At the time Fasi had a salvage business on Sand Island. But he would soon become one of Honolulu's most influential mayors, a three-term leader who spearheaded the city's transformation from an exotic stopover to a dynamic metropolis. Loomis asked him for a recommendation. "Absolutely not," was Fasi's response. "I don't know you." But he invited Loomis and his wife over for dinner the following night. The two families became friends.

For two weeks afterward Loomis' phone rang with job offers — good ones — simply on the strength of Fasi's recommendation. Loomis took a position at 'Iolani High School, which afforded him a salary and entry into local social circles. In Hawai'i conversations often start with the critical question "Where you wen' grad?" The answer gives a clue to where a person comes from and how he or she was raised. It's a modern incarnation of the ancient Hawaiian custom of reciting one's genealogy. At 'Iolani Loomis got a backdoor introduction to this and another idiosyncrasy of Island life: graduation parties that rival royal coronations.

His education continued at City Hall, where he joined Mayor Fasi's team as director of the Office of Information and Complaints. His first complaint call came at 8 p.m., at home. Mrs. Mary Treby was on the line to report that there was a dead dog in her yard.

Fasi insisted that city employees list their numbers in the phonebook—and a local radio personality took full advantage of this accessibility. J. Akuhead Pupule (a.k.a. Hal Lewis) let discontented city dwellers rant on the airwaves about broken streetlamps, unfair meter maids and the like. Then he'd broadcast Loomis' direct line. Loomis didn't mind; he enjoyed solving Honolulu's problems. But when the city's garbage collectors went on a wildcat strike, things got a little hot. Fasi refused to capitulate to the workers' demands and fired all four hundred strikers. During a two-week standoff, Loomis fielded phone calls so threatening that police officers patrolled his house at night.

During Loomis' nine years of running interference for the city, he facilitated a few touchdowns of which he's humbly proud. One was the "beach bus." After a kid complained that drivers wouldn't let surfers bring their boards on the bus, Loomis conscripted a "stubby," or short bus, removed its back seats to accommodate surfboards and scheduled it to run between Waikiki and East O'ahu's beaches.

Another of Loomis' coups involved legendary Hawaiian slack key guitarist Gabby Pahinui. Loomis discovered that the talented musician worked on the city's road crew, laboriously filling potholes in the blazing sun. The problem-solver arranged to have Pahinui transferred to the Parks Department, where he could teach children to play music. "Gabby came into my office with tears in his eyes to thank me," remembers Loomis.

When the Emperor of Japan visited Honolulu, Loomis suggested that Mayor Fasi invite every tenth city resident with a driver's license to the honorary lū'au. Hirohito experienced a cultural event that truly was by and for the people.

Loomis left his city desk to start an ad agency—and ended up with politicians for clients. Most agencies avoid political work but Loomis loved it. "I've played a role in electing some very good people," he says. "Neil Abercrombie [Hawai'i's current governor] was a client from day one." Loomis retired in 2002. "I love the people here: so open, welcoming and warm," he says. "I've been here fifty-one years, and I could never imagine living anywhere else."

While some people choose to migrate from their birthplace, others are uprooted. When the Vietnam War came to a sudden end in 1975 Americans evacuated the country en masse, airlifting Southern Vietnamese refugees out along with soldiers. "Operation New Life" brought 125,000 Vietnamese citizens to US bases, including one in Hawai'i.

Jennifer Nguyen, a shy 14-year-old, was in Saigon visiting her sister in April 1975. She was alone in the house when her American brother-in-law burst in looking for family members to evacuate. Nguyen, who didn't speak English, couldn't tell him that they'd gone to see a movie. He drove her to the airport, stopping two hundred feet outside the gate to put her in the trunk. She wasn't scared; she'd already seen enough during the war to numb her feelings.

Amid a mass of evacuees, Nguyen boarded a military transport. "We changed planes in Honolulu," she says. "I remember seeing a lot of people with black hair." That vision stuck with her long after she reached her final destination: Thornville, Ohio, where her sister and brother-in-law lived. Nine months passed before her family in Vietnam learned of her whereabouts; communication within the communist country was restricted and travel forbidden. Nguyen had fun in Ohio, she says, but hated the cold and the unfamiliar food. She was the only Asian student at Sheridan High School, where she made the honor roll despite language and cultural barriers. Her sister wanted to throw her a graduation party. Instead, Nguyen requested a ticket to the place where people had her color hair.

Nguyen was 18 years old when she arrived in Honolulu. She worked as a waitress and then as a bank teller. A diligent employee, she came in early, stayed late and was then quickly promoted to consumer loans. She dated a local fellow who left her a baby girl and little else. Nguyen named her daughter Kaiulani, after the Hawaiian princess. The Vietnamese expat felt more at home in Hawai'i's cultural melting pot than she had in Ohio, but her real investment in the Islands came when she bought a restaurant on Maui.

After Nguyen took over a small restaurant on Wailuku's Lower Main Street in 1994 she discovered that it wasn't as lucrative as the previous owner had promised. One dismal day she counted four customers and rang in \$62.75. "I locked the door that night and cried," she says. The

despairing entrepreneur called her mother. Mom happened to be a cooking instructor back in Vietnam. She supplied her daughter with all new recipes and a surefire secret to success: Peel the garlic fresh every day.

As instructed Nguyen bought produce from the market each morning, cooked all day, cleaned up at night and went home exhausted. On Sundays she'd cruise Wailuku Heights with her daughter and fantasize about living in the posh neighborhood. On the way home they would pass by the beach where the homeless occupied tent cities. Nguyen promised herself that if she "made it" one day, she would share her wealth with those less fortunate.

Within a year business was brisk enough for Nguyen to expand. She moved to a shiny new kitchen beneath Wailuku's Main Street bridge. Her new restaurant, A Saigon Café, became the haunt of local politicians, police officers, actors and artists. She treated her employees like family, and they repaid her by cracking jokes with guests and making them feel like insiders. Nguyen finally traveled back to Vietnam to visit her relatives and collect more recipes. Before long her Buddha rolls, shrimp pops and spicy soups were the toast of local and national food critics. She bought the house in Wailuku Heights and the property her restaurant sits on.

That second purchase didn't come easy. The owner—an old Japanese man—refused to even hear her offer. She was afraid he'd pass the restaurant on to someone else. "He wouldn't talk to me," she says. "Japanese men are like samurai." But she too had a warrior's spirit. She had the property appraised and a bill of sale drawn up. Three or four times a week, she'd bring it by his house, along with dinner and his favorite beer. She'd hang around, watch TV with him and chat with his wife, who loved her. This went on for eight months. She bought him a bigger TV and comfier chair. Still he refused to sign. Finally she played her trump card. Knowing how much he loved gambling, she scraped together \$100,000 in twenties. She laid the cash out in front of him. "Don't you want to go to Vegas?" she asked. He signed.

Today Nguyen can still be found at her restaurant, radiating aloha with a dash of Vietnamese spice. She made good on her promise; for the last sixteen years she has prepared Thanksgiving dinners for Maui's homeless, personally delivering them to the beach.

Of the foreign nations supplying Hawai'i with new residents, the Philippines is by far the largest donor. Over the last five years an average of four thousand Filipinos immigrated to the Aloha State each year. By comparison the influx of Tongans is tiny: around fifty per year.

The Kingdom of Tonga sits well below the equator, and most university-bound Tongans travel to neighboring New Zealand or Australia for school. But in 1978, 18-year-old Tivoli Faaumu jumped at the chance to study in the United States. His aunt worked at Brigham Young University on O'ahu, so he had an entry and a safety net in Hawai'i.

You might expect that assimilation would be easy for someone swapping one Pacific island for another, but Faaumu experienced much of the same culture shock that a European might. Tonga has a strong British influence, while Hawai'i leans heavily toward Asia. Faaumu found mealtimes especially puzzling. Rice with everything? Where were the biscuits and milky tea? "At my first lū'au I saw these bowls of pudding and thought: At last, something I will enjoy," he says. "Of course, it was poi." Over time he grew to love the sour Hawaiian staple.

Like many BYU students, Faaumu paid for his tuition by performing at the school's Polynesian Cultural Center. He played the French horn and danced—the former skill he had mastered in secondary school, the latter he learned in Hawai'i. A business management major, he dreamt of owning his own company. But in his sophomore year he and his new Hawaiian girlfriend discovered they were expecting a child. This presented a problem at school. BYU is governed by

the Mormon Church and has a strict code of conduct; Faaumu's studies there came to an end. He and his girlfriend married and moved to Maui, where her family lived. "Our families did not quite agree with our decision," says Faaumu, "but they supported us." Strong family orientation is something Tongan and Hawaiian cultures share.

Dropping out of college devastated Faaumu. He assuaged some of his frustration by forming Maui's first rugby team and found work at a Kapalua golf course. His boss soon recognized that the ambitious, athletic young man was overqualified for yanking weeds. "Go back to school," the elder told him. But Faaumu couldn't afford college while supporting his young family. "Become a weekend warrior. Join the Army Reserve," prodded his boss.

Faaumu took the advice; he's now a master sergeant. He trained alongside Maui Police Department recruits and in 1985 surprised himself by joining them. He thought he'd had his fill of crew cuts growing up; his father worked for the police force back home. But Maui's Tongan community was growing, and Faaumu saw that he could be an asset, someone who could negotiate with his fellow countrymen who found themselves afoul of the law.

Once an officer, Faaumu regularly consulted with the patriarchs of Maui's largest Tongan families and met with first-generation parents who didn't understand the American school or justice systems— things he'd had to parse for himself. He'd only recently obtained citizenship, after all. "I didn't know the background to the laws I was enforcing," he says. "Giving someone their Miranda's rights didn't make sense to me." Plus, he struggled with report writing. English is his second language—British English—and convoluted American legalese confounded him.

So back to school he went, this time obtaining a bachelor's in business management, the same degree he'd sought years before. When his wife left he became responsible for raising their three kids. He sent them all to college. His youngest played football for the University of Hawai'i— which in itself probably earned the family local hero status.

Faaumu's twenty-eight years in the Maui Police Department have been marked by steady achievements. He was a highly effective vice narcotics investigator and helicopter rappel master who spearheaded numerous marijuana eradication missions. He lobbied the County Council to ban drinking at Kalama Park, effectively snuffing out criminal activity in the area. When a teen cheerleader fell to her death at a local resort in 2004, Faaumu represented his department on national television. In 2011 he was promoted to captain of the Kihei station. Last year he helped launch a mentor program for at-risk youth.

For someone who has spent so much time engaging with the island's criminal element, Captain Faaumu has a remarkably gentle demeanor. "Police work has changed me," he says. "I'm more tactful, less of an alpha male." He smiles. "Maybe when I retire I'll sit under a coconut tree and play my French horn until somebody calls the cops."

Back in Ke'anae, Kristin Hettermann survived that first fateful night. She moved a little closer to civilization—twenty-five miles down the road—and passed the six-month mark with flying colors. She and Dennis Kaaihue recorded the story of their chance meeting for the Library of Congress' Storycorps. Her hanai father taught her how to pick the ripest mountain apples and rappel down a seventy-five-foot sea cliff to an idyllic pool on his property. In return she launched a crowdfunding campaign to help him take the first steps toward his goal of establishing a cultural gathering place.

"In Hawai'i I experienced a spiritual sense of place that was pretty foreign and radical to me," says Hettermann. "Before I moved here I had accomplished many of my goals, but I felt like a little part of my spirit was missing. Five years later I can say that I feel peace and balance." She

has created a new marketing agency, Grace Delivers Communications, that helps people to manifest their dreams—something she knows a little about.