

# Kapaia Foundation Scholarship 2024

## Essay by Chenelle Mae Andres

“When I was growing up, I used to have to walk half one mile through the plantation camp dirt roads and catch one bus for go school,” is the story my Father has told me countless times.

From the age of 3, I would find myself sitting on the cooler in my Great Grandpa Santos’—whom I called “GPapa”— little snack shop at Kaumakani where my family would tell me stories of their past. Unlike my Mother, who made the journey to Kaua’i with her family, my Father’s side has a complex history of immigration: 3 first generation plantation workers, who were all of different generations.

In 1946, my Great Grandma Lucrecia’s—whom I call “GMama”— father, Apo Mateo, first came to Kaua’i alone by boat. He worked in the Olokele Sugar Plantation (more recently known as Gay&Robinson Sugar Plantation), where he retired as a Sakada: Filipino immigrant contracted plantation laborer. Sakadas were individuals who were given “the most labor-intensive jobs (such as manually cultivating and hauling cane) and were paid less than other ethnic groups” (The Sakada Series). Apo Mateo sacrificed being able to be with his family in order to provide them a better life and future. In between contracts, he would travel by boat between the Philippines and Kaua’i to spend time with his family who lived in the Philippines. After over 30 years of this, his sacrifice and perseverance paid off when his family’s petition was finally granted, allowing them to reunite with him on Kaua’i. In 1978, my Apo Mercedes (Apo Mateo’s wife), GMama Lucrecia, GPapa Santos, and one of their sons, my Uncle Ruben made the journey to America. Around 6 months later, the remaining of my GMama Lucrecia and GPapa Santos’ 7 kids came to America: Rowena, Rebecca, Rodante, Renie, Rizalina (my Mama Sally), and Rhoda. My Gpapa Santos joined my Apo Mateo in working at the Olokele Sugar Plantation as a sugar processor until Apo Mateo retired in the 1980s.

Personally speaking, I can thank the Olokele Sugar Plantation for bringing my Grandparents together. My Papa Reynaldo’s mother, Nanay Maria, was born in Honolulu, Oahu, however, moved back to the Philippines and had a family. As she was born in America, she was able to petition her children including my Papa Reynaldo to come to Kaua’i in 1980 with little to no trouble. When her children arrived she was also living in the same camp as my Mama Sally. Within a year of arriving my Papa Reynaldo and Mama Sally met, fell in love, got married, and had my Father. During that time, my Papa Reynaldo also got hired at the Olokele Sugar Plantation where he started as a cut seed laborer and held various positions even after it was bought out by Gay&Robinson in 1994. In 2009 the Gay&Robinson Sugar Plantation decided to shut down operations, and it was at this time that my Papa Reynaldo was laid off as a power plant fire room operator/supervisor. I believe that my family’s shared goal towards creating a better life for their families is what brought my Grandparents together.

The Olokele Sugar Plantation not only impacted its workers, but the residents of its camp as well. My dad, who spent his childhood growing up in the plantation camp, would tell me stories of his adventures as a kid spanning from exploring the plantation camp and the haul cane roads which lead to the beach to picking the wild vegetables growing in the field ditches and trading fruits with neighbors. Experiences of his childhood carried on with me, as old photographs arise of me playing on those same beaches of the plantation property, both before and after it shut down in 2009.

Our family went from being seen as instruments to use for profit to being respected members of the community, through their genuine hard work and patience. Their persistent optimism during their struggles has instilled an eagerness for opportunities in myself. It’s all thanks to them that I even have the privilege to pursue a further education and aspire to be a Nurse Practitioner. To this day, even after my GPapa passed away, the stories repeated to me from the time his snack shop was still running are kept close to my heart. For over 3 generations, the sugar plantation influenced my family’s lives. Now and then, I’ll drive past the little town of Kaumakani where I learned the humble beginnings of my family, inspiring me to always illuminate hard work, grit, and perseverance in everything I choose to do.