

Portrait. Puanani Burgess

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Mehana Blaich Vaughan

Aunty Puanani Burgess is a poet, community development consultant, grassroots activist, and facilitator from the Wai‘anae Coast of O‘ahu. She has been involved in a number of sovereignty and ‘āina-based struggles throughout Hawai‘i, including Kaho‘olawe, Sand Island, and the process to renegotiate taro farming leases in Waipi‘o Valley. Aunty Pua finds it difficult to discuss her role separately from that of her husband of forty years, Pōkā Laenui (Pōkā) Hayden Burgess, because he has always provided thoughtful and intellectual grounding for her work. His research to unearth the history of Hawai‘i’s illegal overthrow provides a foundation of many efforts for Hawaiian independence.

This portrait is a transcribed interview with Aunty Pua, in which she reflects on how her own role evolved to focus on community building and translation, helping different parties to understand each other’s perspectives.¹ She recalls her engagement in opposing the West Beach development on the Leeward Coast of O‘ahu in the 1980s as a turning point in her life. The West Beach proposal included 4,000 rooms in eight separate hotels, 5,200 residential units, a marina, golf course, shopping center, and four lagoons, making it the largest proposed resort development on the island of O‘ahu outside of Waikiki. Aunty Pua helped to negotiate the West Beach settlement to substantially reduce the allowable development size (at the present day site of Ko Olina resort). The settlement also funded growth of two fledgling Wai‘anae community programs teaching the relationship between ma uka and ma kai, Ka‘ala Farms and the ‘Ōpelu Project.² Both became models for ahupua‘a-based cultural education and community-based economic development throughout the state. Aunty Pua connects lessons learned from the West Beach experience to her current work with Hawaiian women prisoners at O‘ahu Community Correctional Center (OCCC).

IN 1982, I was in law school and I decided to go home [to Wai‘anae]. I was pregnant and people thought that was the reason I quit. It was a very convenient excuse, but that wasn’t the reason. I just knew I didn’t want to be a lawyer. [In law school I worked on the Kaho‘olawe negotiations.] I helped to give Protect Kaho‘olawe ‘Ohana a voice that

sounded reasonable. I did press releases and strategized about how to build a campaign, bring different kinds of people . . . not just the bruddah action, but bringing in legislators, folks that make decisions. And during that process I changed from a really loud aggressive activist into something more like what I am right now.

When I went home Eric (Enos) saw me as a resource. He knew that I had done that kind of strategic work with Protect Kaho‘olawe ‘Ohana and was interested to have me come in and see what was possible as a way of defeating the development of West Beach. [At the time,] Eric was running a youth development program, the ‘Ōpelu Project, using the fishing and the canoe [with two uncles from Miloli‘i fishing village on the Big Island], Uncle Walter Paulo and Uncle Eddie Kaanana. They would take teens and young adults to go out and learn how to fish ‘ōpelu in the old way, to weave net and prepare the palu and of all the things that [go] with being a fisherman. The ‘ōpelu fishing grounds off the [proposed development were] one of the major places where Uncle Walter taught and so all of that was going to change with West Beach.

The West Beach development was going to change how life was lived on the [lee-ward] coast by changing the coastline. Their plan called for building lagoons because there was no natural beach that they could use for their resort. They were going to change the landscape of the ocean and the ability for the fishermen to fish, families who relied on fishing. [There were] petroglyphs and sinkholes that were very important archaeological sites to our people and small heiau, small shrine areas that were not mapped but would be destroyed.

And then the issue came up, where is the water going to come from? That is where the farmers came in. Already water was scarce and expensive and there was a lot of it [needed] to water the golf courses, provide drinking water for the resort. What was going to happen to the farms in Wai‘anae?

Part of the West Beach developer's strategy was to promise jobs to the people in Wai‘anae. But people didn't think that really was going to happen because of the literacy and graduation rate being so low. Lots of things had to be done in order to have people be employable at those places and they weren't talking about that. There was worry about displacement of more local people and more new people coming in. Those were the complex issues that we were beginning to understand how deep they were. And people in downtown were worried because we were beginning to touch on issues that made the development very vulnerable to challenge.

We were going to have a hearing before the Land Use Commission and usually we would bring the farmers and the fishermen. But you know it's like bringing fish out of water and to a meeting. They don't look too healthy. People don't look powerful when they come in their slippers and not too nice T-shirt and still smell of the ocean, plenty dirt under their fingernails and they speak in broken sentences and they cry. So what I suggested, and got the Land Use Commission to allow, was to videotape the farmers

and the fishermen on their sites. On their sites they're brilliant. We played the videotape, about a half an hour long, and got all of that tape introduced into the records

[As] our movement got stronger, the concern by West Beach [developers] increased. There was a lot of activity wondering how could they bring us to the table. Before I got into the fracas, they had offered money but no modification of the development. It was always a transactional situation: "How much do you want to go away?" It wasn't money that we were after. We wanted the development to go away. That thing was so huge, a \$6 billion resort, not a million, billion. So a lot of power, and lot of other people's survivals relied on it.

We also didn't understand how much the unions were going to be involved. A lot of union jobs were dependent upon that development. A lot of folks in Wai'anae are in those unions; construction workers, electricians, heavy machine operators. So us keeping the development from going forward meant they weren't working. And you had a lot of pressure family to family and within families.

At the same time we were in the Supreme Court [represented by Native Hawaiian Legal Corporation]. We were worried if the court ruled against us that would set a negative precedent for other communities who were going to be challenging developers. So there were all these complex issues bearing down at the same time. And while we were doing all of this protest and administrative hearings, you know, nobody was home taking care of the programs.

[One friend and business leader proposed that our group and the West Beach developers, including the owners, sit down to mediation] with Tanouye Roshi [founder and head of Chozenji Zen temple in Kalihi]. When they mentioned Tanouye versus going to a court-based mediator we decided to try that. . . . Our group agreed that Eric and I would be the lead negotiators for the discussions.

[During negotiations,] friends in the activist field were calling us sellouts and turncoats and all kinds of things because we were engaged in the conversations that would settle these issues in our community. I could understand the criticisms. I probably had done that too before. But when it was being done to you and you know the clarity and purity of why you're doing it, because you just cannot take the fighting and fighting and fighting and nobody's tending to the taro and nobody's watching the shore, and you know you cannot live that life.

When we were doing the mediation around West Beach, I started to get threatening telephone calls. Men would call and say, "We know where you are and we know where you're going." And, "We are going to hurt your children." So, you know when you choose force against force? They were carrying weapons they were willing to use against me. So my solution was to carry a weapon and be willing and able to use it against them. A friend got his father to loan me his registered pistol, and taught me how to shoot the gun.

So here we are, [after eighteen months of mediation,] signing the mutual agreement between West Beach and our community organization, settling issues we had been fighting over for fourteen years. I am carrying the gun in my bag when we sign the documents at Governor Waihe'e's office. Afterwards [the members of our community group] all go to Zippy's to eat and celebrate a moment of peace. After our meal, we get into the van, and start to make our way back to Wai'anae. I forget my bag at the restaurant.

So I call and I ask if they found my bag. "Oh yes, we're holding it for you." [When we went back], there were about ten police officers waiting at Zippy's to arrest me for carrying a weapon. Now, fortunately for me, the gun was wrapped in a diaper, and the bullets were wrapped in another diaper. In the police car, me in the backseat, the lieutenant asks what I was thinking. I tell him that I was getting threatened, that I was scared. Then he said, "But you know, if the gun is all wrapped up and the bullets was all wrapped up, how you was going hurt anybody?"

"Yeah, that's the problem. I didn't want to load it. It might go off. It might hit innocent people. So I just kept it separate."

"Yeah, would be funny, you telling them, 'Try wait, let me load the bullet inside the gun and then shoot you.'"

They took me to the police station and they fingerprinted me, booked me, and put me in a cell all by myself. I sat there. I was singing. [My husband] Hayden came in the cell. He shook his head and said, "This is not surprising."

He got me out of jail, and for some reason I never got charged. I wasn't arraigned. I wasn't anything. I just got let go. Except that arrest followed me and I could not go into the prison, OCCC, because I have that thing on my record. All these years later, getting me into prison for the women's project, I couldn't have done it if the warden wasn't there to vouch for me. So that was my crime, and people end up in jail for less. There were circumstances that kept me out of prison because other people intervened on my behalf who had power. I didn't know it, but I knew it long after the interventions happened. These women didn't have that circle around them, so I could've been one of them, still in prison after fifteen years, for carrying a weapon.

A prison can become a place of refuge. [In my work at OCCC,] I am doing my piece in transforming an experience that can be so debilitating into part of a healing process, part of returning the life of the land back to people. I am given the opportunity to work with women, most of whom are Hawaiian, a few of whom are from Nānākuli or Wai'anae where I live. Some are in there for life, or have spent half of a very young life, at say twenty-four years old, in prison. These are women who have done things that are really hard for people on the outside to think of as making them redeemable.

I was asked to come in to begin to examine the trauma of the women which resulted in them choosing crime. [The idea] was that in order for them to heal and be whole again, they need to process that trauma, understand it, and walk their way away from

it. I thought, “No, that’s not my job.” That people have suffered and that they choose not to talk about it publicly, that’s their right to choose, even though we are “trying to help them.”

I saw that my real work was to help design a process through which people, the women first, could have trust in other women that they live with. Our project tries to [make prison] not just healthy and safe physically, but healthy and safe spiritually; a place that appreciates their intelligence, in which those things that usually get separated from them when they come into prison are restored. And my role is not to help them. My role is to create a safe place in which they and other people who work in the prison can come together and figure out a different way to run a prison.

The process was about creating a level playing field—from the psychologist, to the women, to the head of their work release program, everybody had to do something hard. Tell you my name, how I got it, how I feel about it, about my community, and finally to tell you the story of my gift. Most of the people, women in prison and the people in the professional roles who work in their circle, they never talk about that stuff. So just about everyone there experienced something about being human in a deep way for the first time in prison.

I was very sure that there would be women I met there that would amaze me. I knew that there would be women I met there who would scare or even disgust me. I was not prepared for the level of thoughtfulness, the level of care, and the level of hurt in the things they’ve had to go through. And I wasn’t ready for their ability to bring outsiders to their circle. The thoughtfulness they have, having gone through the prison system: the way this particular prison is run, what it did to them to be in prison, how it has created problems with their children. They were able to tell the story of how they got to where they are as a way of hoping, giving hope to other young girls and women not to follow their footsteps, that it’s preventable. They do more thoughtful consideration of their lives than a lot of us who are wandering around the streets daily.

I talk to them about my life . . . that I am who I am, and I am amazed that they are who they are and where they are. I don’t know why I’m not where they are. [When the threats during the West Beach mediation started], all I could think was, “I going [to] find you and hunt you down and curse you and your family”—that’s where I was. When someone threatened my children, I thought I could kill. But when that situation happened, and having a gun and taking it apart in a way that I could never use it to do harm, I understood something fundamental about who I was. It was that moment that changed my approach to work. I started to look at reclaiming words like “development” or “economics.” How do we create a parallel economic system in our community, which we manage and control and govern?

I can tell you about my regrets. Once the door was open to West Beach, then it’s open to Walt Disney.³ I’m still struggling with being angry about the Disney people having so

many resources to create a message that may be appealing to more people than the West Beach developers, which looked just like exploitation of land and people. The question I always ask, but never get an answer to, “Where is the water [for the Disney resort] coming from? What lo‘i? What patch of land? What MA‘O Farms?+ Where is that water coming from?” So in some ways, I’m still in the hard questioning place but not closing my heart off to the people who are struggling to answer that.

AUNTY PUANANI is newly a grandmother. I ended this interview by asking her what she wanted her seven-month-old granddaughter to know. Here is her response:

I want her to always know what it’s like to have mango growing in her yard.

I want her to know what it’s like
to have taro and fish growing in her yard.

I want her to be able to go to Kaho‘olawe
without having to get permission,
to stand at the top of Moa‘ula
and see the course her ancestors took to go back to Kahiki,
to be able to swim in those waters.

I want her to experience an estuary
in the community she comes from
which hasn’t been taken apart.

I want her to be able to go into any library
and take out the documents signed by her queen,
to touch them and to smell them,

To run her fingers on the pen signature of the queen,
of all of our ancestors who held the line in one way or another for us.

I want her to hear the story of how the queen would welcome people
who had come and walked for miles and days
to bring her a gift of fish.

And the fish was spoiled.
And she would open the wrapping,
she would take the fish,
and she would eat it.

I want her to know that queen also.
The one who understood what a real gift is.

I don’t want her to grow up in a world
in which things are in museums,
But to know that history is alive

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and she has a responsibility to keep it alive.
I want her to know she has cousins beyond blood.
That is what I want for her.

Notes

1. Puanani Burgess is my aunty and mentor. We met in the summer of 1997, which I spent shadowing her through an internship with the Wai‘anae Coast Community Alternative Development Center. I admire the way she brings people together, illuminates others’ gifts, and speaks underlying truths with gentleness and humor. Because Aunty Pua is a natural storyteller, I chose to transmit her words directly. Any additions [in brackets] are intended only to provide context and clarity, allowing the reader to experience her story in her voice for themselves.

2. See Ka‘ala Farm, <http://www.kaalafarm.org>. The ‘Ōpelu Project evolved into the Wai‘anae Coast Community Alternative Development Corporation.

3. West Beach, known today as Ko‘olina, is now the site of Disney’s Aulani resort, opened in late summer of 2011.

4. MA‘O Farms (<http://www.maoorganicfarms.org>) is a Wai‘anae organic farming project that grows youth and community by teaching farming, business, and leadership skills while helping to provide a bridge to tertiary education.