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## Lynne Waihee: Champion of Children's Literacy

by Katherine Nichols  
Photography by Raymond Wong

Lynne Waihee behaves more like your favorite auntie than a former first lady of Hawaii who has influenced thousands of people to commit to reading aloud to their children. She offers scrambled eggs and potatoes from a Crock-Pot in the modest Waikiki office of the nonprofit Read to Me International Foundation where she serves as president (a full-time volunteer position), promoting reading aloud to children throughout the state.



Waihee confers with Akana at Read to Me International's office.

Not until everyone is fed and sitting comfortably with coffee or water does Waihee finally sit down to talk about herself — reluctantly. "I'm just an ordinary person, after all," she says.

The former Lynne Kobashigawa, 59, grew up in Kalihi Valley and attended Hawaii Mission Academy. She remembers studying the omnipresent encyclopedia collection in her home and walking two miles to the public library to check out books, but there wasn't much time for leisure reading.

Her father died when she was six years old, leaving her mother to raise five children under the age of 12. Everyone in the family was expected to help in her mother's restaurant, Farrington Inn.

Beginning in third grade, Waihee, who is the fourth sibling, washed dishes and eventually graduated to the jobs of waitress and cook. Those modest roots stayed with her; she and her husband John Waihee, Hawaii's governor from 1986 to 1994, lived in a two-bedroom apartment in Kalihi until they moved into Washington Place.

"Lynne is very down-to-earth," says Liane Akana, executive director of Read to Me International. "She has no pretenses whatsoever. She will go out of her way to make you feel comfortable — and that includes the CEO of a major corporation right down to the janitor. That's just the kind of person she is."

Akana calls Waihee the "heart and soul" of Read to Me International, which operates on a budget of \$200,000 to \$300,000 per year, largely obtained through grants. Waihee, her three staff members and scores of volunteers visit schools to educate teachers and parents about the importance of reading aloud to children every day for at least 10 minutes, help create television advertisements about reading and distribute books for new parents to share with their infants. They also organize an annual fun run and reading event to raise money for school libraries, and work on a unique program for prisoners.

"From a teacher's perspective, reading aloud means a child is there listening," says Waihee. "It's a time when children can just enjoy the story." There are no divisions by reading level. "We're all equal. (The book) is not something that's too difficult for anybody, and it's a springboard for other discussions."

Furthermore, nationwide research indicates that students learn differently. Some absorb information better orally, and listening to a book read aloud can help them in ways that can't be measured.



Waihee recently read aloud to students in Wendy Fujiuchi's first-grade class at Liliuokalani Elementary School in Kaimuki.

Waihee's affinity for causes related to literacy began during her career as a high school English teacher in Michigan and Hawaii. With the help of Rotary Club of Honolulu Sunrise and its president at the time, Jack Bates, she founded the Read to Me International Foundation in 1997 while serving as the honorary chair of the Governor's Council for Literacy during her husband's tenure in office. Her exposure to Hawaii public schools showed her how unprepared many students were by the time they reached ninth grade, so the council looked to the middle schools, whose leaders pointed them to the elementary schools.

Eventually, Waihee realized that "it really starts in the home."

Jennifer Dang, the Honolulu Advertiser's education coordinator, was involved in those efforts. "I think the most important thing that Lynne did was to create a round table of community people who were interested in promoting literacy, which allowed us to work collaboratively," says Dang. A variety of events and programs evolved from this think tank.

Today, Waihee and others read aloud at local schools, talk to parents of preschool children, and through the Books for Babies program, send out between 11,000 and 13,000 packets to brand-new parents while they're still in the hospital's maternity ward. These packets contain best sellers such as Read to Your Bunny and Goodnight Moon, as well as printed information about why it's important to read to babies and toddlers.

The Prison Literacy Project is another aspect of Read to Me International that is close to Waihee's heart. Volunteers read aloud to inmates, then prisoners select age-appropriate books for their children, which they read aloud on tape. The tape is sent home with a note from the incarcerated parent.

This small exchange can leave a lasting impact on families. Prisoners often realize how poorly they read and want something better for their children. As a result, reading and education get more attention. One young teenager who had not spoken to his incarcerated father for months



received a tape in the mail. This prompted him to finally accept his father's phone calls to ask when the next tape would arrive. Other children have been known to keep the tapes under their pillows at night.

"I think it helps humanize them," Waihee says of the prisoners. And doing something to help their children boosts self-esteem, promoting good feelings all around.

Since its inception, Read to Me International has initiated partnerships with other organizations to share resources and complete its projects. It acts as the catalyst, creating the plan and drawing together the teams.

Early in her involvement with literacy, a story that particularly moved Waihee was that of Geri Kunishima and her son Steven. When he was 18 months old, doctors told the family that Steven was so severely impaired he would never walk, talk or understand the world around him. Steven's two older sisters began reading to him, even though they didn't know if he could hear or understand them. Every night they read at least five books to him — stories with short text and large colorful pictures that exposed him to both language and visual cues.

One night as his sisters read aloud to him, Steven struggled onto his stomach, reached for one of the books propped against the wall and opened it to a certain page. When he did the same thing the next night, his family suddenly realized that he could remember prior reading sessions.

Progress was slow, but Steven eventually learned to walk, talk and read, and received his GED at Kuponon Learning Center, which Kunishima founded in 1988. Writer John Pekkanen chronicled Steven's amazing story in a December 1993 Reader's Digest piece entitled "The Family That Wouldn't Be Broken."

"Geri believes that much of Steven's development occurred because her daughters read to him every day," notes Waihee. "That story really inspired me and made me a greater supporter of reading aloud to children."

Waihee admits that when her husband took office, she felt an enormous responsibility to support him and make a difference on her own. "I felt an obligation to improve something about the way we do things in Hawaii," she says.

She was so dedicated to this task that she forced herself to overcome a fear of public speaking. Shy by nature, she describes her first foray into that arena as "so stressful; my stomach was all in knots. It was a little unnerving for me." Even today, she becomes nervous before speaking in front of a group, but says she has made a lot of progress since that first endeavor.



## The Benefits of Reading Aloud

In an article on Read to Me International's Web site, [www.readtomeintl.org](http://www.readtomeintl.org), Jim Trelease, author of *The New Read-Aloud Handbook*, notes that reading aloud to children is beneficial in numerous ways, including:

- Provides a positive reading role model
- Creates a bond between the reader and the child
- Improves the child's listening comprehension
- Expands the child's attention span
- Helps develop the child's language, critical thinking and communication skills
- Exposes the child to rich vocabulary and good grammar
- Stimulates the child's imagination, creativity and curiosity
- Establishes the reading-writing connection
- Provides the child with a lot of background knowledge; the more a child is read to now, the more he/she will learn for use in reading later
- Nurtures the child's emotional development, raising his/her self-esteem
- Is fun, providing the child with the pleasures of reading



Reading is an enjoyable daily pastime for Lynette Young-Pak and her daughter Devyn.  
Photo by Nathaniel Pak.

Read to Me International conducts free presentations for parents, schools and community groups on the importance of reading aloud to children. To receive its quarterly newsletter or to arrange for a presentation, call 955-7600 or e-mail [read@readtomeintl.org](mailto:read@readtomeintl.org). You also may visit the organization's Web site to learn more about its programs and to review its recommended book lists for readers running the gamut in age, from preschool to adults.

When Waihee is not giving speeches or working at Read to Me International, she serves on the board of directors for several nonprofit organizations, including Castle Medical Center and Adult Friends for Youth, a group that helps youth at risk.

According to Akana, who has known her for nearly 20 years, Waihee takes good care of her elderly mother and her husband, now an attorney and consultant in private practice (her children, John Waihee IV and Jennifer, are in their thirties and on their own). She also maintains a spotless house, cooks delicious meals and tends to her spiritual life with dedicated church attendance.

Even during her hectic life as Hawaii's first lady, Waihee treated her staff like family, and, Akana says, nothing has changed. Ever since she left the Governor's mansion, she has welcomed her former cook's three children into her home every Friday night.

Any spare time Waihee finds beyond these commitments is devoted to her secret addiction: the numbers puzzle Sudoku. But even with that constant temptation, it's clear that no family matter or volunteer project will ever go unattended for long, and that this gentlewoman will accomplish everything she sets out to do. "She speaks softly," says Dang, "but her impact is great."



## Glimpses of Lynne Waihee

Favorite pastimes: Reading, Sudoku, crossword puzzles, traveling, collecting recipes

Favorite songs: What a Wonderful World, Let There Be Peace on Earth, Friends

Favorite movie: Joy Luck Club

Favorite books: To Kill a Mockingbird, The Giving Tree

Favorite TV show: Clean House

Favorite musical groups/vocalists: Israel Kamakawiwoole, Willie K, Amy Hanaialii Gilliom, Olomana, Johnny Mathis

Favorite color: Purple

Favorite dessert: Banana cream pie

Favorite escapes: Japan and my sister Jane's house

Favorite meal: Butterfish misoyaki and sushi

Favorite indulgence: Massage/spa treatment

Childhood ambition: Being a nurse or stewardess (that was the term then)

First job: Dishwasher at my mom's restaurant

Proudest moment: Husband John Waihee's inauguration as Governor, 1986; daughter Jennifer's passing the Hawaii State Bar, 2000; son John Waihee IV's investiture as a trustee of the Office of Hawaiian Affairs, 2002

Fondest memories: Visiting my relatives in Okinawa as a junior in high school and then with my children and husband when he was Governor

Biggest challenge: Saying "no" to people

What inspires me: Stories of people who overcome adversity and make this world a better place

Who inspires me: My husband because he always knows how to handle sticky situations and difficult people

Most recent splurge: Going to California for the weekend to attend a friend's wedding

Biggest thrill: Being hoisted in the air by sumo wrestler Chiyonofuji

Happiest moment: Finding out that my brother, a prisoner of war in Vietnam who was listed as missing in action, was coming home

Current goal: Ensuring that every child in Hawaii is read to every day for at least 10 minutes

