

A personal letter from Dr. Kani Blackwell



May 22, 2007

To: Perspective Donors
Growing Our Own Teachers Scholarship Fund

From: Dr. Kani Blackwell,
Professor, University of Hawaii, College of Education serving Kauai

Aloha,

I have shared my story with the students I teach, for they need to know it can be difficult to be needy and to hold your head high, but I tell my students that there is no shame in asking and accepting financial assistance, as long as you give back to the students you teach and the community you serve.

My mother was a beautiful, unwed mother, who died of a cerebral hemorrhage at the age of 25 years old. I was almost six years old when she died and my half sister was a year younger. We were raised in an orphanage in Kentucky and later in not-so-kind foster homes. My family was my sister and the generous people from organizations: the Rotary Club, the Lions Club, Kiwanis Club, and sometimes the Key Club from the local high school. One of the clubs would always make sure at Christmas and other holidays, that we were remembered and would bring gifts to the orphanage.

Being of mixed heritage (I never knew my father, but it was rumored I was the little Indian orphan), I was different looking from the other white kids, but I had a drive of independence and had remembered my mother saying to me, "Education can make a difference in your life". I was the only child from the orphanage (there were 32 of us) who ever went to college and of course the only one to receive a Master's degree and later a Doctorate of Education degree. Without scholarships, none of that would have been possible. I am today, a happy teacher of 40 years who works to give back what I have been given. Four years ago, in 2003, I knew I could give of my expertise, hard work, and love, to future teachers of Kauai, and left a full professor, tenured position at a university in California to come and teach and serve on Kauai.

In 2003, the University of Hawaii, Manoa, as part of their effort to serve the neighboring islands, began a Statewide Teacher Education Program to accommodate the need for elementary, secondary, and special education teachers on Kauai, Maui, Molokai, Lanai, and Hawaii Island (referred to as the neighboring islands). After teacher candidates complete their first two years of college (most of them complete an AA degree at a local community college like Kauai Community College), they are able to complete an additional two years on their own island, without having to relocate to University of Hawaii, Manoa on Oahu. The Statewide program allows for teacher candidates to receive their baccalaureate degree and teaching certificate through the University of Hawaii, Manoa. The teacher education program is a hybrid program utilizing face-to-face classes as well as online coursework, which enable students to continue to live and work on their perspective island like Kauai, as well as be placed in local schools for their field experience and student teaching semester.

Teacher candidates on Kauai are different from the traditional profile of the typical B.Ed. student. Many of the teacher candidates hold down multiple jobs in order to afford their education. Teacher candidates are older, typically in their 30-40's and most have children of their own to support. When loans and scholarships are tapped out, some teacher candidates withdraw from the program because of financial hardship, especially when the student teaching semester arrives. Secondary candidates are often paid to teach during their student teaching semester under a regular teaching contract, but elementary candidates must do their student teaching with a mentor teacher, full time (7:30 am – 3:30 pm Monday-Friday) for a full semester of 16 weeks and receive no monetary compensation. The situation is compounded in that their educational commitment does not allow the candidates to work during their student teaching semester, which creates a hardship for many of the teacher candidates. Most of the teacher education candidates struggle to maintain daily living expenses and cannot afford the \$4,000 cost per semester for their education.

Besides teaching fulltime in the Statewide program and serving as university supervisor on Kauai, I volunteer my time to get the story out and to hopefully garner financial support for teacher candidates through scholarships. What is interesting is that I had tried to rally community support for scholarships during the past four years I have been on Kauai, but it wasn't until I appeared as a speaker for the Rotary Club of Hanalei Bay (November 30, 2006) that good things began to happen. My expertise is in teaching and how children learn, not how to raise money for worthy causes. Rotarians Robert Dickstein, Marjorie Gifford, and president Steve Whitney, along with other members of the Rotary Club of Hanalei Bay, gave the conduit and seed money for establishing a Rotarian Scholarship for Growing our own Teachers. In addition, Rotarian Michael Somers donated his time and expertise in advertising and created a brochure that is used whenever I share our Teacher Education story.

Through the Rotary Club of Hanalei Bay, a scholarship fund has been established to assist in providing annual scholarship(s) for the purpose of “Growing our own Teachers” to local teacher candidates on Kauai. There are 19 Elementary and 12 Secondary teacher candidates presently in the Statewide programs on Kauai. This effort will not only ensure that the teachers who teach the children will have an invested interest in staying and teaching on Kauai but will also effect the quality of education on Kauai.

So if you want to know if you can make a difference with a donation, please know there could be no better investment. Eleanor Roosevelt said, “we cannot always build the future for our youths, but we can build our youths for the future.” That is what education is all about, closing the gap between what we are and what we can be.

Mahalo nui loa to the Rotary Club of Hanalei Bay and other contributing Kauai Rotary Clubs for sponsoring this program, for with donations through them, community businesses, and other concerned individuals, we will be able to Grow Our Own Teachers on Kauai!

Mahalo for your support,

Kani Blackwell