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MEET MAPUANA KALEOALOHA

She Spun the Globe and Entered a Whole New Life

cover photo provided by Kumu Mapuana Kaleoaloha

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She Spun the Globe and Entered a Whole New Life

by Michele Eisch
photos provided by Mapuana Kaleoaloha



Some people wonder what might be beyond the horizon. Mapuana went to find out.

Growing up in New Hampshire, she was curious about the world from an early age. Her grandmother encouraged that curiosity, believing that life was meant to be experienced, not just observed. So, when Mapuana went to college, she realized something was missing.

"There's a big world out there," she thought.

Just a few months into her college career, she took off. Literally. She boarded a plane bound for Egypt.

It wasn't a typical journey for a young woman from New Hampshire, but Mapuana had been fascinated by antiquities since writing a research paper in high school. Egypt offered her something a classroom never could: the chance to stand in the presence of history.

She studied some of the oldest places on earth, absorbing the sights, stories, and history around her. When she returned home, the experience didn't leave her. Instead, it pulled her back.

She studied Middle Eastern dance fervently and eventually returned to Egypt, where she spent years working as a professional dancer and docent at an Egyptian museum. For about five years, she moved in and out of the country, working contracts with the Egyptian government in both dance and museum work. She had more than a career, she had a way of looking at the world.

Mapuana learned that you can't *truly* understand a culture by seeing what is presented to visitors. You must look deeper – listen, learn the language, understand the traditions, and respect the people whose history you are entering. That lesson has followed her to this day.

In between her travels, she built a life in America. She met a wonderful man, married, and had two children. She went to cosmetology school and became a hairdresser, eventually developing a chair-leasing business in several salons.

One of the salons she worked in belonged to an Egyptian man, creating an unexpected bridge to the country she loved. Their shared connection helped her continue working in Egypt and traveling back and forth. And when her daughter turned 20, Mapuana took her to visit Egypt. Her son was less adventurous with traveling.

Europe became part of the journey, too. During breaks between commitments, Mapuana traveled throughout Europe while teaching dance and English as a second language.

Then came another turning point—one that began, appropriately, at home. She was visiting her parents in New England when her mother looked at her and asked, "Where you going next? Because I know you're not staying put."

Mom had one of those old-fashioned globes in the living room, so Mapuana walked on over, spun it, and where her finger landed would be the decision.

Hawaii.

And just like that, another chapter began.

But Mapuana didn't approach Hawaii as a traveler looking for beautiful beaches, good food, and a new adventure. Her years in Egypt had taught her better than that. She knew there was a difference between visiting a culture and understanding it.

She discovered that Hawaii was not simply the image presented to tourists. Its richness was in the language, family, traditions, history, and relationships. It was also a multicultural world shaped by Tahitian, Samoan, Tongan, Māori, and other Pacific influences. So she listened, learned, and dug deeper.

Mapuana returned to New England and founded the Alohalaini Dancers, connecting with people throughout the region with Polynesian cultural backgrounds. The group performed everywhere from nursing homes, sometimes without charge, to major events in Boston, including performances for Pearl Harbor survivors.

Word traveled.

The Hawaiians call it the "coconut wireless". It's a joking term for the remarkable way information moves through a close community. That wireless eventually brought Mapuana to Kumu Vicki Holt Takamine, a respected Hawaiian cultural practitioner with ties to Hawaii's royal lineage. Mapuana was invited into a class that was not simply another dance workshop. The invitation was rare, and she understood that immediately.

Traditional Hawaiian knowledge is held carefully. Some teachings are passed through close cultural networks, from trusted teacher to trusted student. Those studying together normally become like brothers and sisters -ohana (family). To be welcomed into that circle as a non-Hawaiian was an honor and a responsibility. Mapuana knew she had to earn their trust, and she did.

Her teachers and fellow students took her under their wings, bringing her into increasingly intensive study. She learned that being entrusted with cultural knowledge meant protecting it, respecting it, and carrying it forward *responsibly*.

At that point, she stopped dabbling in various other Polynesian dances. She chose hula exclusively.

Shortly thereafter, she moved to Hawaii, beginning a relationship with the islands that would span decades. She moved in and out of Hawaii for about 20 years, then spent the next 15 years living there permanently.

Her first marriage ended, but she and her former husband still remain friends. She remarried, and together, she and her husband built their life there. She continued teaching her students in the States through phone calls, videotapes, and, eventually, more advanced technologies like Skype.

Outside of hula instructing, Mapuana worked for the Veterans Administration in Hawaii and as a systems analyst for Kamehameha Schools, a respected educational system serving only Native Hawaiian students. For Mapuana, that position was more than a job. It gave her an inside look at the importance of preserving Hawaiian knowledge through multi-faceted education that spans not just the usual subjects, but traditional foods, chanting, hula and other elements of the old ways.

She was not Hawaiian, but she had earned enough trust to be allowed close to a culture she deeply respected. Hula, she knew, carries stories, language, history, and responsibility. Hula kahiko is the ancient form, and hula 'auana is the more contemporary style. But to Mapuana, neither is simply movement.

Hula is a place of healing.

While working with veterans, including those struggling with PTSD, she discovered the powerful connection that could come through hula and drumming. After work, she would sit beneath a mango tree with veterans and drum with them.

Something happened there that went beyond dance. People connected, relaxed, and found a place where they could simply be. That same healing spirit continues today, through her practice right here in Homosassa.

Ultimately, she returned to the states to be closer to her aging parents. She moved her mother in with her and cared for her around the clock. The woman who once spun a globe to decide where she would go next had come full circle.

Adventure was no longer about finding the next faraway place, but being present for the people she loved, surviving through illness, and thriving by continuing to learn and share what she had been so fortunate to receive. Gifts are meant to be given, or else they're not gifts, right?

One of her newest students is a social worker learning hula and drumming so she can use what she learns to help her own clients. Again, the coconut wireless provided, as it has so many times in Mapuana's life.

She now teaches professional Hawaiian chefs, social workers, home-care providers, retired teachers, and others, many of them actively aging adults.

They come for the dance, but they stay for the connection. Hula creates something that cannot always be explained in steps and choreography. It creates community. It creates sisterhood. It gives people a place to breathe, learn, move and heal.

"It's an art form with a purpose," Mapuana says. Perhaps that is why it has carried her through so much.

Her life has been filled with adventure, but also hardship. A lot of it. She's a 5-time cancer survivor… and if that's not enough, she's had broken ribs, feet, knee injuries…you name it. None of it came from hula, but much of it healed or improved because of it. She kept moving.

Mapuana's journey has taken her across continents and into cultures very different

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from the one she was raised in. But she never learned to measure a life by the number of places visited. She measures it by what those places taught her.

Egypt taught her to look deeper.

Hawaii taught her to listen.

Hula taught her that culture is something to honor, not simply imitate.

Illness taught her resilience.

Caring for her mother taught her that sometimes the most important journey is the one that brings us home.

And it all began with a young woman who looked beyond the classroom and thought, simply, "There's a big world out there."

She was right. And it's still out there. Still spinning.

And after everything Mapuana has survived, learned, and loved, she's got a pretty good idea what to do with it.

HULA CURIOUS?

It's More Than Dance!

Hula tells stories. Through movement, mele, and language, hula connects us with the people, place, history, and traditions of Hawai'i. At Hālau Hula Alohalani, students are encouraged not only to learn hula movements but also to understand what they are dancing about. We explore Hawaiian language, pronunciation, history, geography, cultural traditions, and the meaning of the mele (songs) we share. Our goal is to create a welcoming place where students can learn, move, grow, and experience the Spirit of Aloha.

Starter Hula New to hula? Begin with the foundations: posture, basic steps, hand gestures, rhythm, and simple mele (songs). No previous dance experience is required to enjoy hula.

Adult Hula Learn traditional hula foundations while enjoying both hula kahiko (old/ancient hula style) and hula 'auana (more contemporary style). Classes combine movement with the stories, language, and cultural content behind the mele.

Keiki Hula A joyful introduction to Hawaiian music, movement, language and culture designed especially for children.

Kupuna / Seniors Hula Hula can be a beautiful way to stay active while enjoying music, friendship and cultural learning. Classes can be adapted to different levels of mobility and experience.

Chair Hula Experience the storytelling and graceful hand movements of hula from a seated position. Chair Hula makes participation possible for those who may find standing for extended periods to be challenging.

Hula for Fun & Fitness Move, smile and enjoy Hawaiian music while getting gentle but overall exercise. The emphasis is participation, movement and enjoyment rather than performance.

Kāne Hula Hula is for men and boys, too. Explore the strength, rhythm, history and traditions of kāne hula.

Holistic/Praise Hula A gentle approach combining movement, music, mindfulness, cultural appreciation and connection. Express faith through graceful Hawaiian-inspired movement, music and worship in a welcoming environment.

Traditional Attire and Lei Care Hula students learn to wear traditional attire–pā'ū skirts and culturally significant adornments–with respect. They are also taught to make and care for lei, important Hawaiian symbols of aloha and respect, maintaining both their beauty and tradition.

Protocol and Respect in Hula Class Hula classes require proper protocol, including respectful entry and exit. Students uphold discipline and show respect for the kumu hula and each other, creating a supportive and nurturing atmosphere.

FIND YOUR SPOT: Text Kumu Mapuana at (808) 753-2440 or visit www.mapuana.net