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Gerri Shapiro is the new Executive Director of Na Hoaloha, also called "Neighbors Helping Neighbors."

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Na Hoaloha

By Cindy Schumacher

Loving friends help their neighbors.

Just when we were thinking how great our island is, we discover a volunteer organization devoted to making it even greater through more loving-kindness and compassion.

Na Hoaloha, (Hawaiian for "Loving Friends"), also known as Neighbors Helping Neighbors, is a unique service based on making a world of difference in someone's life.

Gerri Shapiro, new executive director of Na Hoaloha, has over 25 years of experience as an education consultant, most recently working as a project specialist consultant with Maui Long Term Care Partnership.

"The services we provide are from the heart, and the strength of Na Hoaloha is in its volunteer base," said Shapiro. "When other agencies are unable to provide basic and essential services to people in need, Na Hoaloha has consistently been able to find a volunteer to fill the request for service.

"We are looking for loving volunteers to help seniors and those with disabilities to stay in their homes and remain independent, and enable family members and other caregivers some time off to help recharge their own batteries," Shapiro continued. "We focus on three main needs: friendly visits, telephone reassurance and respite care. Other requests for service include transportation, shopping, housekeeping, yard work, laundry assistance, medical transport, meal preparation and others.

How does Na Hoaloha serve? "We recruit, train and match caring volunteers with people in the community who need extra help," said Shapiro. "In return, our volunteers receive personalized matching services to make sure both volunteer and care recipient are compatible, mileage reimbursement for travel to and from their care recipients home, liability insurance to cover both the volunteer and care recipient, and flexibility to match our volunteer's lifestyles and schedules."

Volunteers also receive heartfelt appreciation for their aloha.

"We have been called 'The Little Engine That Could' because Na Hoaloha-Neighbors Helping Neighbors has been continuously under-funded and understaffed, with frequent turnover in leadership," said Shapiro.

The newly formed 2006 Board of Directors took it upon themselves to roll up their sleeves and run the organization with no paid staff, each taking on a needed role, such as staffing the office, bookkeeping, recruiting volunteers, writing reports and grants, and cleaning and painting the office, until county funding enabled them to pay off their bills and fill two part-time positions in early 2007. Na Hoaloha has emerged as a respected contributor to the well being of the people on Maui.

Shapiro's great passion for Na Hoaloha is deeply rooted in her belief that we all need each other.

"Even if you don't need help today," she said, "you very well may need it tomorrow. Therefore, we can and should be available for our neighbors."

Shapiro and Special Projects Director Rob Leigh-Clark create partnerships with congregations, organizations, groups and individuals throughout Maui to mobilize outreach programs to assist those in need—and to become 'ohana.



"When you volunteer and give of yourself, the blessings are enormous," said Rebecca Ashton (standing). She helps Ellen Lindquist and urges everyone to share their abilities with someone in need and see the difference it makes in both lives.



Charlotte Farrell gives heartfelt thanks to volunteers like Phyllis Tucker of Neighbors Helping Neighbors.

Ellen Lindquist, a Pukalani resident, receives visits by Na Hoaloha volunteer Rebecca Ashton. They both agree that, "Sharing your aloha with someone in need is the greatest gift you can give."

"My friendship with Rebecca has grown so much that she is like family," said Lindquist.

It was Lindquist's mother, Julie, who found out about Na Hoaloha and contacted them. Ashton helps when the regular caretaker is not available, and as Lindquist reported, "It's great. I am helped to do things I have a hard time with, and some which are impossible to do myself. I am so grateful for Rebecca in my life and to Na Hoaloha for sending her."

When asked why she volunteers, Ashton replied, "I wanted to do something outside of myself and be of value to someone else. Ellen and I share an interest in similar activities and we laugh together a lot, which is priceless. We learn from each other and have great respect for each other as well."

Na Hoaloha is unique in that its services are provided based solely on need. There is no age criteria, income test, medical determination of need or level of disability required. In fact, Na Hoaloha has recently begun to partner with Easter Seals and Quality Behavioral Outcomes to recruit volunteers with disabilities so that they can get out into the community and share their abilities with frail elders.

Na Hoaloha recently launched a Website with information and links to resources for seniors and people with disabilities. The site serves to inform the community about current volunteer opportunities. A donation form for those who want to help support the mission is also available.

Shapiro is finding a great response from people who have visited the Website. If you are interested in assisting the kupuna, would like to be a supporter or receive more information, visit www.naaloaha.org or phone 249-2545.

There is work in loving kindness for everyone to do—there is no limit on compassion.