

Never too old to hula

By Carole Kelleher SPECIAL TO THE INDEX-TRIBUNE



PRACTICING THEIR MOVES ARE, from left, Liz Quinn, Beth Heine, Nellie Woodward, Faye Behrens, Minta Giomi and Annette Giroux.

Robbi Pengelly/Index-Tribune

July 9, 2013

Betty Ann Bruno's quest to find a few people who wanted to hula once in awhile has blossomed into Hula Mai, an unlikely group of graceful dancers who are now "ohana," the Hawaiian word for family.

Starting out as a who-knows-how-this-will-go hula class led by Betty Ann at Vintage House senior center, Hula Mai recently put on the its fourth annual hula show on the Plaza's Grinstead stage for an SRO-crowd whose whistles and wild applause were heard blocks away. With beautiful costumes and fresh flowers in their hair, these women who once never imagined they'd dance for an audience were transcendent.

Annette Giroux, 42, is the youngest and Liz Quinn, 85, is the eldest of the two-dozen women who perform the barefoot hulas with a fluidity that erases age. Annette's interest grew from a

family vacation in Hawaii with her husband and two school-aged children last year. “It was the most wonderful place,” she said. “I didn’t want to leave.” The day after arriving home she serendipitously saw an article about hula classes at Vintage House. “My husband said to go for it so I jumped on the phone. From the first class I loved it. I thought, ‘I can do this!’ and I embraced the Hawaiian culture.” Annette even changed her email address to hulaheart.

Liz has been her husband’s loving caregiver for the past 25 years. She thought learning the hula would be just the respite she needed, as well as a sentimental reminder of their honeymoon in 1953. What she thought would be a quick break from the routine evolved into an enveloping new passion. “The hula rejuvenates me. It’s my Shangri La to be able to do such lovely dances with my dear friends. Hula saved my life,” she said.

With Liz’s comment as her cue, Nellie Woodard added, “It saved all our lives.” Maybe, especially so, hers. Just after joining the beginning class in 2010, Nellie experienced a health crisis that is still a serious challenge, yet she continues to be dedicated to mastering the hula. “I can lose myself in hula. It has become a way of life for me because it speaks to the essence of life itself.” Knowing that her health may one day decline, Nellie doesn’t worry about being sick or even dying. She only hopes that the day will never come that she won’t be able to do the hula.

Nellie is now a very accomplished dancer and does a comic, cheeky solo hula called Princess Poopooly, about a woman who gives her papayas away. “I am a great-grandmother and I do this naughty dance!”

The Hula Mai dancers practice once a week, and there is a core group that does road shows, performing at Sonoma Valley Hospital once a month, and at retirement homes and the occasional private luau. The hula sisters, as they call each other, also socialize together, supporting each other through life events, both good and bad.

“I have to say that every one of us has faced traumatic experiences since we joined Hula Mai, and the power of our sisterhood is amazing,” said Faye Behrens, as tears filled her eyes. Faye, who now owns the Cottage Inn and Spa, lived for many years in Hawaii and thinks of herself as Hawaiian in her heart and soul. She believes the aloha spirit travels the world through dance.

Beth Heine, too, was drawn to Hula Mai because of a lifelong affection for everything Hawaiian. She was given a grass skirt and coconut shell top as a gift when she was 8 years old, and the fascination was planted. Her career took her to Honolulu for a couple of years, and she later owned a home on the Big Island. Hula brings her back in time to those happiest of times in the islands. “I looked at the paper one day and I saw this opportunity to learn the hula. I couldn’t believe it.” She signed up and entered a new, joy-filled phase of her life.

Betty Ann’s original goal to share her love of hula ultimately led to her founding of Hula Mai. In 2009, she taught the first class, and as a way of encouragement told the attendees that at the end of the six lessons they would put on a show. Her students took it from there, getting together to practice on their own. Friendships formed, enthusiasm grew. Soon CD music was replaced with the Hula Mai band. The dancers with several years experience now know about 40 hulas, and also traditional Hawaiian chants. Some of them search for fabulous Hawaiian fabrics to use for their costumes, which some of the dancers get together to sew. Betty Ann’s husband Craig

Scheiner, a retired television cameraman, helps sew the costumes, too, in addition to his role as the group's photographer and webmaster.

Betty Ann was born in Hawaii and raised in California. Her life in front of the camera began when she was a little girl – she was a munchkin in “The Wizard of Oz.” She would later become an Emmy-award winning television news reporter for KTVU Channel 2, where one of her most memorable stories was giving a personal account of the loss of her home in the 1991 Oakland Hills firestorm.

Her father is Dutch Irish and her mother is Hawaiian Chinese. When Betty Ann was in her early 20s, she suffered a bit of an identity crisis, and decided to find a way to get in touch with her Hawaiian roots. She did this by embracing hula, a dance she first learned as a child. She found an accomplished teacher, Ida Namanu'okawa'a, who became her Hula Mother, teaching her everything about the Hawaiian culture.

Betty Ann studied hula one night a week and performed professionally for many years, until the demands of raising three sons and working in television led to her giving it up. She lost all of her hula choreography, music and memorabilia when her home burned down. Ida passed away in the 1990s, and her final connection to hula was gone.

It wasn't until 2006, when on the advice of a psychic, Ida's grandson invited Betty Ann and some of her hula friends from long ago to his son's baptism, that Betty Ann's interest in the hula was reignited. Her old friends shared music and instructions from the old days, and Betty Ann started dancing again, leading to her teaching the class, and ultimately Hula Mai.

“I never could have imagined this would happen,” Betty Ann said. “It just mushroomed. You can't plan community. Hula Mai is a very dynamic, growing thing.”

Minta Giomi first visited Hawaii in 1962 and it felt like home. She returned many times and was told by a Hawaiian elder to “hang on to the aloha and have a sense of humor,” a philosophy that has guided her. When she did the sassy solo, “Sophisticated Hula – Talk of the Town,” at this year's show, her aloha brought laughter and applause. She admits hula can be difficult and there is a lot to remember, yet “Hula makes you happy,” Minka said, with a glint in her eye.

“Young or old, thin or wide, anyone can do the hula and enjoy it,” Betty Ann adds. And the reason is simple. Hula is the dance of the heart.

New Hula Mai classes begin at the Vintage House in September. Go to hulamai.org.