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Hawaii News | Lee Cataluna

## Angels' charity gives wings to Kauai teachers, students

By Lee Cataluna

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COURTESY ALOHA ANGELS

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Students at Wilcox Elementary School on Kauai show their gratitude for Aloha Angels' gifts to their teachers. The group has donated \$700 to every public elementary school teacher on Kauai.

Above  
Nakai

If you've spent any time in a classroom, you know it's a rare, blessed thing when someone walks in and asks, "What do you need? How can I help?"

More often, someone from the outside is telling you what to do and how to do it.

A major movement on Kauai was started a few years ago just this way, from the roots, by one man asking a principal what she would do with \$10,000.

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"She looked at me like I was crazy," Ric Cox said. "She said, 'No one ever asked me that before.'"

That earnest, no-strings-attached query lit a spark that has roared into a project that has given \$700 to every teacher in 13 of the island's elementary schools to use at their discretion for classroom supplies and field trips.

The program has funded 60 after-school clubs at 10 campuses. It is bringing heat-abatement measures to the island's hottest school and has set lofty goals by asking teachers and students, "What do you need?" and then going out and getting it for them.

But back to the beginning:

Five years ago, Cox, a retired journalist and entrepreneur, was new to Kauai. He got bored when it rained for three weeks on the north shore of the island. His sister told him to go out and make friends. "She said to join the Rotary, so I did," Cox said.

As a member of the Rotary Club of Hanalei Bay, he joined his fellow Rotarians in bringing books to local elementary schools. It was on one of these trips that he asked that question. He also volunteered as a tutor at Kilauea Elementary. Another Rotarian noticed that the students seemed to be lacking school supplies and, just out of the generosity of his heart, went to Walmart and bought notebooks, pencils and erasers to bring to the school. That simple gift had an immediate impact.

Cox, who says, "I'm an organizer" from his years in journalism and business, saw great potential in this simple act and came up with a plan. He went to his fellow Rotarians and said, "I want to give \$700 to every teacher in this school, \$200 for field trips and \$500 for supplies."

That goal was reached very quickly, so the Rotarians turned their attention to Hanalei School. Next, they adopted a public charter school on the North Shore.

"We did that for three years and then we said, 'Let's do the whole island,'" Cox said.

And they did. Last year, the group that took the name "Aloha Angels" adopted every teacher in 13 elementary schools on the island. There have been times when Cox shows up at faculty meetings to tell teachers that they will have funds to buy school supplies.

"The teachers scream, they applaud," he said, "Some cry."

Aloha Angels sets up accounts for each teacher through the schools' PTSA. The teacher makes purchases and turns in the receipts. At times, they've also given out gift cards.

The funds come from philanthropists — big and not-so-big donors. Cox and his fellow volunteers are relentless in spreading the word and asking for money.

"I'm the most impatient person on this island," Cox said. "I don't believe in committees. The schools need things today."

The movement gained a powerful supporter when Senate President Ron Kouchi became involved. "I showed up at his fundraiser wearing my halo. I wear my halo everywhere," Cox said. "The senator likes to joke, 'This guy came to my fundraiser and asked me for money!'"

After Cox made his pitch, Kouchi did more than make a personal donation. He became an adviser to Aloha Angels. With Kouchi's help, the nonprofit has been working to put heat-abatement measures in Kauai's hottest classrooms.

"We try to be a nimble, lean, effective supplement to the DOE (Department of

Education)," Cox said.

After three years, the Rotary decided they wanted to spin off the program and create a donor-advised fund with Hawaii Community Foundation.

"HCF has enormous credibility in the state," Cox said. "We have really big dreams. We want to raise and give away a million dollars a year on Kauai alone."

Last month, they passed the halfway mark, raising \$501,000 for Kauai schools.

"I'm retired, I have nothing else to do," Cox said. "Aloha Angels has no staff, there are no salaries, there's no overhead because we all work out of our homes."

But there is so much for them to do.

They started hearing that what many students need, even more than books and pencils, are role models and mentors. That led to an idea for after-school clubs.

They asked teachers, "If we paid you \$40 an hour for one hour a week, what subject would you like to teach?" Teachers turned to the things they loved the most — gardening, basketball, art history.

One teacher started an after-school sign language club so students could learn to converse with their deaf schoolmates. There are now 60 clubs at 10 schools on the island.

"The whole idea is mentoring," Cox said. "A teacher once told us that there are some kids who go through the entire day and nobody asks them, 'How are you?' ... The most important thing you can do is sit beside a child, look them in the eye and listen to them."

Aloha Angels has a Facebook page where it posts photos and videos of the programs it's made possible. And then there are letters, many, many letters of gratitude from teachers finally able to buy large-print books for visually impaired students or cleaning supplies for their classrooms.

"As a kindergarten teacher, I go through paper and other art supplies like crazy," one teacher wrote. "I use a lot of construction paper and with your donation, I was able to restock every color of construction paper, meaning we could do projects with paper we wanted instead of having to settle for what colors we had left! I also was able to purchase paint in all the colors. I even splurged on the skin tone paints for my multicultural units. Very exciting for us!"

Among the posts is a handwritten letter signed by a girl named Mary Jane who wrote, "Thank you for being nicefull to us."

"Whatever those students need to be good students, we're going to go out and get it for them," Cox said. "Right now, a school said they'd like to have a musician come every morning and play for the children to start their day. I'm working on it."

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