

## Kūha'o Business Center

by ANNETTE PAUOLE-AHAKUELO

Kuaha'o Business Center



Through the Kuaha'o Business Center, Moloka'i's people are given the tools of self-sufficiency and empowerment to arrive at their own economic solutions.

On March 15, the Moloka'i Kūha'o Business Center reopened its doors into a new, expanded space at the Moore Center on Kamoi Street in the heart of Kaunakakai Town.

Kahu **Jimmy Duvauchelle** presided over the blessing, stating with humble conviction that the center has already been blessed by the people whose lives have been improved by the services offered there.

Indeed, the blessings were close to overflowing that day with the center adorned and perfumed with the scents of many flower arrangements given by a number of partners and grateful entrepreneurs.

The walls too displayed pictures of Moloka'i entrepreneurs: a multi-generational family of beekeepers in their suits making Moloka'i's finest honey; a young woman starting a sound and entertainment venture; high school youth showcasing their wares; and proud farmers with their home-grown produce. A crafter's *opih*i shell art and jewelry and picture samples of a mother's digital Photomax business were among the enterprises featured at the center.

Huge, freshly cut bamboo placed beautifully along the reception area was donated by the Kuleana Work Center in Halawa, a client who successfully secured start-up capital with the assistance offered by the Kūha'o Business Center. This aesthetic enhancement contributed to the festive quality of the day as the public enjoyed the foodstuffs and fruits donated by agricultural entrepreneurs.

While the day marked the beginning of a new chapter, it also reflected the culmination of a collective and hard-won vision of many partners. That vision included the creation of a center that would "serve as an advocate and vehicle of empowerment for Moloka'i's families to achieve both individually and collectively financial independence and abundance in the formation of healthy and sustainable businesses."

In 2001, a consortium of partners, including the Molokai Community Service Council along with the Ke `Aupuni Lokahi-Enterprise Community, the US Small Business Administration, Bank of Hawaii, and American Savings Bank pooled their resources to form the Kūha'o Business Center. At the time, it was



Moloka'i Entrepreneurs at the Kuaha'o Business Center 'Talk Story' Workshop with Tom Liu & Karen Asiu of MEDB.

housed in a small space at MCSC's administrative headquarters. While the center provided much needed business resources to Moloka'i, it became evident that in order to fully serve community needs additional funding would be required to deliver the envisioned business support services. In 2004, the Moloka'i Rural Development Project agreed to provide the necessary seed money to move the center into a more expanded space and to hire **Annette Pau'ole-Ahaku**elo to serve full-time staff as a Business Assistance Facilitator.

Today, the center is working toward sustainability and "stand-alone" as the name Kūha'o implies. The Moloka'i Rural Development Project has since ended its fiscal sponsorship of the project. Principal sponsorship now comes from the funding approved by the Maui County Council through a grant provided by the Office of Economic Development to serve Moloka'i's growing clientele, support agribusiness, and youth entrepreneurship. The center has assumed a vital role towards Moloka'i's economic revitalization through empowering residents to establish small businesses. For the 250-plus clients who walk through the center's doors and take part in various workshops, Annette with her gentle approach and steadfast commitment to every entrepreneur, has managed to give each individual a greater sense of possibility and opportunity. Her assets-driven approach and genuine aloha for each client are the secret ingredients to the successful outcomes realized within this short period.

These outcomes include the creation of 30 new businesses and 17 new jobs associated with them. Moloka'i's existing businesses have also sought the services offered at Kūha'o and to date, 32 of them have im-

proved their services and products, and expanded their operations. Twenty businesses now have experienced an increase in profits, sales, and productivity. Twenty-two clients developed business plans. Of those clients, 21 secured start-up capital. Nine operate self-sustaining agriculture enterprises. A Moloka'i SCORE chapter of retired entrepreneurs has been established to provide free business consulting services to clients. Solid partnerships

have been built in the public and private sector with collaborative efforts undertaken to train all age groups in entrepreneurship and to offer specialized training (e.g. patent, trademark, and copyright requirements; agribusiness; etc.).

These partner collaborations include working with the Center for Entrepreneurial Development of the Pacific to implement the OED grant.

It also includes a joint undertaking with Tri-Isle Research Conservation & Development - Moloka'i Agricultural Development Program and the University of Hawai'i College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources (CTAHR) to plan future workshops in the agriculture sector.

Also working with CTAHR, the center is developing a youth entrepreneur program and curriculum at Kualapu'u Elementary School for 4th graders and organizing a Moloka'i Homesteaders small tree plantation training and basic business classes.

In the promotion of increased accessibility to business assistance services county-wide, the Kūha'o Business Center also co-sponsors workshops on Moloka'i with the Maui County Business Resource Center. The Molokai Chamber of Commerce, Maui Economic Opportunity, and many other local partners also play a central role in the Center's success.

These accomplishments are largely attributed to the County's strong commitment and endorsement, as well as other partners within the public and private arena. The county's investment in Moloka'i is an investment well made. And the Kūha'o Business Center is helping the community cash in on that investment.