



Young couple, Julia Aleszczyk and Ryan Poland, have spent the last two years in the tiny community of Kalaupapa. Julia is the museum curator for Kalaupapa National Historical Park, and Ryan volunteers his expertise in the Natural Resources Dept. propagating and introducing native Hawaiian plants to the landscape, as well as working with the endangered native Hawaiian Hoary bat.

Our interview takes place in their single-family abode, in which they've made their home since 2016. It's a few thousand miles from fast-paced New York where Julia grew up after being adopted into an Italian Polish family, and even farther from busy London where Ryan attended school after being born and raised in Northeast Ireland. They met while attending classes at England's Durham University amid a meeting of anthropological scholars while drinking old wine and smoking in a yurt.

After juggling VISAs, Green Cards, lots of paperwork and taking turns being with one another in their respective countries, they were getting ready to teach English in Korea when Julia received a callback for a position with the National Park Service in

Florida.

"I've ALWAYS wanted to work for the park service," she says. "I had to take it!" Korea would have to wait. They settled in Tallahassee for her new tech job, but one day, Julia saw a job pop up in Kalaupapa, Hawai'i, and she applied. "You know, what do we have to lose?" she says with a shrug.

Julia got the job. "... basically what happened was I quit my old job, we got the 90-day VISA approved, got married, and then two days after getting married, moved here," she recalls in a whirlwind fashion. "So we call this place our 'Forever Honeymoon.'"

I'm curious as to what they love most about their responsibilities in Kalaupapa. "It's definitely working with the artifacts, the archives in the collections," replies Julia, "and having an understanding for what this (community) used to be like, how it's evolved, the people who were here, the legacies they left behind.

"A lot of the patients here are religious so we have a lot of religious items in the collections," she continues. "You'll see specialized tools that they used to help them with Hansen's Disease, where they're using their own ingenuity to create these

tools and share them. The history here is really interesting and I feel it really captures humanity. The patients all had a lovely sense of humor, and you still feel a small community vibe that's always been a part of Kalaupapa. And it's nice to be a part of that now. So working with those collections, you feel that, and it gives you a deeper understanding of this place."

"For both of us, it's understanding," adds Ryan, "feeling that we're making a positive impact for the future. I think Julia is safeguarding these artifacts, looking after them, preserving them, to ensure they're stored and going to last. And even I can see how that's been an impact for her because family and friends will come and they will want to see these things. We had someone recently who was thrilled to see this legacy was being preserved for an individual, and she got a real sense that the person's not gone, the art's still here, and that it's been looked after."

"And the same applies to Ryan," says Julia. "Lots of times in the nursery he's propagating heritage trees that the patients planted in their own gardens."

"There's a calling to the community," she adds. "... we'd love to have days when we're not doing anything, but that's not what Kalaupapa's about. It's about being out in the community, participating in it, you know. We're all here together so we all spend time with each other. And that's the one thing, when we leave here, we want that. We want a small community that we can be a part of and contribute to ... where it feels like family."

That being said, it's been a two-year-long honeymoon so far. How long will it last?

"We discuss that all the time," says Ryan. "And it's never a question we can clearly answer." Like anyone who feels like he/she has found his/her niche, it's tough to move on. Especially when you've found a wonderful community that surrounds you, a fact that both feel very strongly about.

"We've both lived in big cities," explains Ryan. "When you live in London, you live

in flats with 'X' number of people. ... you don't know who these people are even though you share that same six feet of carpet in and out everyday. And even back home in Ireland, they live in a small cul-de-sac, about 30 houses. Couldn't tell you who lives in half of them anymore. And that's a very common way people live now. You know, very insular ... we're all on social media rather than actual physical contact.

"When you come here, it's so different. There's less than a hundred people, it's a small community. And not everyone gets on all the time because we're human beings. But it's a wonderful way to live life where people are friendly and nice."

"We know when the time comes for us to leave — and it will come because we want to have children at some stage — it's going to be heartbreaking," says Ryan. "So we talk about it all the time, and it has to happen, but ... when the time feels right. For now we just realize we're very fortunate to be here, and we're spoiled rotten."

We make our way to the nursery where Ryan raises native plants that will eventually be propagated to two main areas: Kauhakō Crater, located in the center of Kalaupapa Peninsula representing the dryland forest area, and the coast. The planting season is typically from November to February, but Ryan is waiting until we're more into the rainy season so the plants won't require as much maintenance. In the meantime, native plants such as the wiliwili tree, the rare hala pepe and the plumbago, an understory ground cover, await their journey to the crater. The coastal naupaka and hinahina also bide their time.

"It's very rewarding when you see the impact, particularly at the end of the day when you're finished with an area," shares Ryan, "you can see all these little saplings. In my mind I already envision this big impact in the future, and I'd enjoy coming back in 20 year's time, and seeing large areas of forest that we've restored. To know



At the nursery where Ryan raises native Hawaiian plants for propagation

that I helped contribute to that ...”

We then head to the single-story building that houses the memories, stories and artifacts of Hansen’s Disease patients made up of two secure climate-controlled rooms. Julia opens the door to the first room, and it’s as if we’re entering someone’s home.

“These are our collections,” shares Julia. “This wing houses more of our smaller items, personal effects that belonged to the patients, their artworks. On the other side is a lot of old equipment from the hospital that were used to treat Hansen’s Disease, and furniture pieces from patients’ homes.

We come across a black and white photo of a couple in white. “Here’s a picture of two patients on their wedding day,” says Julia solemnly, her voice echoing in the room. “... (your) wedding day is supposed to be the happiest day of your life — a union of families — but at that time there was still limited contact between patients and non-patients.”

She explains that before patients could meet outside guests, they had to shower at the old hospital and have their clothes “fumigated” (ie. sprayed with formaldehyde). Even after all that, there was still no physical interaction allowed between patients and non-patients.

When asked to share about any particular artifact that has deeply touched her, Julia thinks for a moment before replying. “There’s

so much in the collections that is just so unique and so special, but the one thing I find the most interesting ... well, we have a lot of casts.

“Hansen’s Disease attacks the cooler parts of the body first, and it affects each person differently,” she thoughtfully explains. “A lot of patients had resorption of their toes ... that could make it difficult to walk and balance. In the early 90s, a cobbler came in, took casts of all their feet, and made special shoes, customized to each patient.”

Julia shows us the shoe of Auntie Gertrude, who was known as the Cat Woman for her multitude of cats. “You can see her shoe is still actually covered in cat fur,” laughs Julia.

Ryan’s interest lies in the huge stamp collection. “You always think of this place historically, as somewhere very isolated, cut off from the world,” he says. He asks Julia how many stamps they have. “Hundreds of thousands,” she replies, “not even exaggerating.”

“We’re talking, like, stamps from all over the world, from countries that no longer exist, places like Nazi Germany,” states Ryan, enthusiastically. “So I think that’s a real beautiful story ... you feel this place is isolated and cut off — and that’s why they were sent here to be cut off from the world,



Julia takes us through the numerous artifacts housed in Kalaupapa National Historical Park's collections

to be sent to this prison.

"But when you look through these stamps," he continues, "you realize they had a big, broad relationship with the world, and news and information, and stories being shared all across time and space, and it's incredible. A real unique moment of history here."

When we actually see a couple of the large bags of stamps — and Julia says there are 15 boxes filled with these kinds of bags — we're astonished. Where do you even begin organizing? "So it's our ongoing volunteer project," laughs Julia.

The tour continues as the stories of Kalaupapa's past residents come to life in photographs, paintings, wheelchairs, improvised medical equipment, modified utensils such as spoons, a drying rack for fish and meat, original bed frames from the Bishop Home for Girls, the old school bell, an old projector from Paschoal Hall which was the center of Kalaupapa society, sewing machines, furniture, even a modified bat from the baseball team known as the Kalaupapa Dodgers.

The settlement's first and only baby crib is also housed here. "As soon as babies were born, they were taken away from their mothers," shares Julia. "There would be a

kokua to care for the baby, but there was still separation between mother and child."

Before leaving, I ask what they'll take with them upon their departure from Kalaupapa.

"... a lot of tears ..." says Ryan. Both agree, laughing. "We had several good people who left recently, and maybe, just the knowledge of them moving on is making us both emotional, realizing the time's gonna come for us. So when the time comes, it's gonna be just a lot of beautiful memories, and that's all we can hope for."

"I saw in the archives recently, a picture of Father Peter," reflects Julia. "He was here a long time ago. And there's a quote he put in there. I'm paraphrasing, but it was something along the lines of, 'When I die and if they were to cut me open, they would find Kalaupapa in my heart.' And I remember thinking, yeah, I hear you, Father.

"The impact of this place is gonna be — it has its ups and downs, you know," continues Julia, "but at the end of the day, it's an amazing place to be, and we're fortunate to be here. And when we leave, it's going to be so heartbreaking. But, that's the nature of Kalaupapa."