



faces of
KALAUAPA

MELI WATANUKI by Sarah Yamanaka



A petite woman stands in the doorway to a beach house, welcoming us with kukui nut lei. It's at this hale with jalousies open to the ocean breeze that we learn about Meli Watanuki after she grills us on what precisely this interview is for. Her tiny frame holds a feisty, resilient spirit and no nonsense attitude that have helped her find her place in this tiny community of Kalaupapa.

Meli's roots are in American Samoa where she was born and raised, and initially diagnosed with Hansen's Disease at the age of 18 in 1952. At the time, people diagnosed with the disease were usually sent to Fiji for treatment, however, Meli says she and a small group of people were left in Samoa.

"We were in the hospital, we're all young," says Meli. As the disease progressed, the physical condition of patients was often distressing, so younger people who had not developed to that stage were afraid. "And then us, we kind of back off—God forgive, those days, you know. After that we tried to get close to them because, we figure, we get good hands, good face, good body, but they all crooked mouth, any kind eye ... you know, the hands, feet. The doctor said, 'Don't be afraid of others; they're just like us.' So after that, we all come together, yeah. We play music, do any kind."

In 1960, Meli traveled to Honolulu with a group of people. She had never been to Hawai'i and instead of getting to enjoy her new surroundings, Meli was given the responsibility of taking care of the children by day and stayed in at night after dinner. She was unaware that her friends had made an arrangement.

"They make me stay take care the kids, everybody out," says Meli. "They fix me up with someone, this Filipino. This Filipino was 62, and when I come here, I was only 26. So I never know anything. Just like last week I came to Hawai'i, and this week they want me to marry this man. I never meet any Filipino. In Samoa, they no more Filipino. So





I take care (the children) everyday, they all disappear; they say they go to work. But they go take care the stuff for the wedding.”

While Meli sat outside one evening, an elderly neighbor said to her, “Tomorrow is your happy day; you going meet the young man.” Meli explains her friends had told the neighbor not to say anything. “What young man?” Meli had asked the neighbor. “But every evening when they come, when they pau what they do, I see this guy, this old man. They said, “This is our friend, yeah.”

An earlier blood test had been a precursor for obtaining a marriage license. Meli doesn't say anything about her feelings, but her sense of sadness, of being alone and desperate, come through her tears as she shares her story.

“Then they all came home in the evening and we all eat together,” she says. “And I just pretend I don't know what is going on. Then I see inside my friend's room; this gown is hanging in there. So I knew, already, something ...”

Meli explains she couldn't sleep that night, so she got up and dressed herself at around

midnight, walking out of the house with no thought in her head except to get away. At about 1 a.m., one of the children woke up, saw her empty bed and started crying. Soon the parents arose and called the police.

“They took me back to the police station,” explains Meli, holding back tears as she recalls wandering the neighborhood and being picked up by a patrol car. “I saw them (her friends) waiting for me. And then I just cried and cried, and told them I want to go back (home). I said, ‘You guys did this to me,’ but they never told me the truth. It's okay if they tell me the truth; I have no choice.

“They took me back, and the next day I got married. They gave me the (wedding) gown, and I went rip it up. And then after that, I wore my (regular) clothes. I married him.”

For two months, Meli and her husband got to know one another while living apart. It was her resilience that made her to come to terms with the situation and she became determined to accept her new husband. Some time later, they had one child, a boy.

Afterwards, she learned the truth about their marriage from her husband.

“... he told me he bought one car for them, a new car. And took them to ... some kind of wrestling (match). He’s the one (who) sponsored them.” She said he had also lost money and that’s when the people she was with told him about Meli, who was young and single. “And that’s how I found out what happened,” she concludes.

In 1964, Meli found what looked like a mosquito bite on her knee. She explained to the doctor that she had been sick in American Samoa and been treated there. However, after a biopsy was taken, she was quickly admitted to Hale Mohalu in Pearl City, set to undergo additional treatment.

By this time, Promin had been in use for 23 years as a treatment, and no new patients were being sent to Kalaupapa unless they wanted to go.

After Meli had been admitted, her husband had talked with a group of people outside the building and learned why patients were sent to Hale Mohalu. He then left Hawai’i for good, taking their son with him to the Philippines without telling her.

Prior to leaving American Samoa in 1960, Meli had met Pili, also a patient, who had left Samoa before her. He had promised to keep in touch and said he would pay her airfare to the Hawaiian Islands.

“I told him, ‘Make sure you write me,’ recalls Meli. “I think only two letters I received. After that, no more. How many letters I sent him! Gunfunnit ... you see what happened?” she exclaims with amusement.

The next time Meli saw Pili was in Hale Mohalu. “He look at me, he say, ‘Oh, I with you again!’ says Meli. “I tell, ‘Wait — you married?’ And he say, ‘I never marry, I always wait for you!’” Meli responded, “But you never pay my fare. I gotta come with the wrong people!” As tragic as the situation had been, we laugh along with Meli at her recollection and her sense of humor.

The two were married on October 1, 1969 after moving to Kalaupapa.

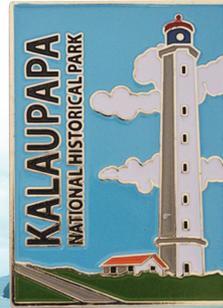
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“ ... I think about what has happened up until today. And I try to be strong, to do things for the church ... I neva give up because I think that’s why it makes me still alive.”

“He was a good man,” says Meli. “He really respected all the people here in Kalaupapa; they always like him. He was the sheriff here ... he died on June 28, 1981. He buried right down at Papaloa. He get his picture ... face the road.”

Meli met Randall in 1982, who had come to Kalaupapa in 1981 as an employee for the State Dept. of Health. After seeing each other for nearly a decade, she gave him an ultimatum.

“I told him, ‘Either we marry or you go home. You go your own house.’” Ten years is a long time regardless of a woman’s age and Meli’s deep faith compelled her to make their relationship official in the eyes of God. She drew the line and Randall accepted. They were married on April 15, 1995, the same year that Father Damien was beatified.

Meli’s story isn’t over yet. Unbeknownst to her, divine forces were at work.

Father Damien was beatified on June 4, 1995, and Meli, along with other patients, were to attend the event in Brussels, Belgium. Her husband would stay home to care for their dog. However, the Roman Catholic Bishop in Honolulu had called the Father at Kalaupapa to arrange for Randall to accompany Meli.

Meli called Father to ask about this development in a roundabout manner. “Father, who went pay for his fare?” she asked. ““This is from the Pope,” was the reply.

On departure day, reporters gathered round the patients to take photographs. Meli didn’t want her picture taken and upon seeing Father, told him so. He replied, “Don’t worry Meli. If they take your picture, you and Randall, it’s something ...”

“What something?” Meli had asked. “Please Father, tell me now. I wanna know. Don’t hide anything from me!”



Ghost, Meli and Randall's number one "daughter"; they have three other furballs at home

Meli says a reporter came by and said, "You know why? All the reporters know already. You and Randall are going to receive the relics from the Pope."

"So I said, 'Okay, I going shut up then.'"

Just before the beatification ceremony, another miracle took place — Meli met Mother Teresa. Randall shares the details of how this pleasant and unexpected moment took place. He said it was during the procession in which some chosen faithful from different congregations throughout Hawai'i and Belgium presented gifts to Pope John Paul II. When the procession drew near the stage, Mother Teresa and her party intercepted, stopped and greeted the gift givers from Kalaupapa that included Ku'ulei Bell (who presented a flower lei) and Meli (scroll of prayers from parishes across Hawai'i).

"... they (Mother Teresa and sisters) all touched my shoulder," says Meli softly. "And then they come to me, say hello. And then she hold my hand, kiss my hand, and I kiss her hand, and I kneel down. And I told her, 'Mother Teresa, please, pray for all Hawai'i. Pray for all the sick people in Hawai'i. And pray for us in Kalaupapa, and pray for my family.' And then I just put my head like this (looking down), and she said, 'My child. Okay, I will.' And I just cry." Meli sheds tears recalling this truly special moment.

Then it was time to receive Damien's relics from Pope John Paul II. Randall says that it was Father Bukoski, Senior Rose Henry Reeves, Meli and himself who received the relic laid in a koa reliquary (a container for

holy relics) that had been specially made by Sam Kamaka. The relics were, in essence, the bones of Damien's right hand, which were later reinterred in his original grave at Kalawao next to St. Philomena Church.

"We go up, time for us bring our gift to him (Pope John Paul II)," shares Meli. "It was pouring rain, pouring rain. They went carry the koa, the relic, and me and Randall went stand. They were blessing the relic, and then one of the cardinal told Randall to put his hand on top, and put my hand, and put his hand, and he prayed all over us. It was a really marvelous thing happen.

"You know, it's really until today, I cannot forget. And that's why they make me strong. And I think about what I went go through and my cancer, and I think about what has happened up until today. And I try be strong, to do things for the church ... Every mass I go Kalawao, I take the stuff for the service. I no give up. I neva give up because I think that's why it makes me still alive."

Meli and her husband were also fortunate to attend Father Damien's canonization in 2009 at the Vatican, as well as Mother Marianne's canonization in 2012.

Meli has lived a life of hardships and disappointments, and embraced them with tenacity, resilience and a sense of humor. Now in her 80s, she still works part time for the National Park Service at the store. She's called Kalaupapa home for 49 years now, and it's here that she's found peace and contentment, continuing to live a life committed to her faith in God.