know who you are

CONNECTING TO THE LAND

UNCLE BOBBY ALCAIN

by Sarah Yamanaka

A friendly handpainted sign indicates ʻĀina Pulapula located just off the road amid acres of Hawaiian homestead land. This is Uncle Bobby Alcain's home and farm, which he has worked for 13 years.

Wearing a green t-shirt that reads, "Sustʻāinability," Alcain welcomes my photographer, Chase, and I at the gate. Down-to-earth and casual with his salt-and-pepper hair in a braid and a big smile, he shows us around the main house introducing us to a small group of women helping out on the farm. Leading us into a clearing within a small grove of trees and bushes, Alcain arranges three chairs beneath the shade and we all sit down to talk.

"I was awarded this homestead lot in 1984," says Alcain. "But I was living on the east side ... so you're talking a long commute everyday. I tried, but couldn't do it. So I fenced it up and put animals in here till I was ready. I lived and worked and raised my family on the east side, and when I retired from the fire department, I said, 'Okay, I get time.'"

At 18 years of age, Alcain had only known Molokaʻi, and he was determined not to work in the pineapple fields. He wanted to get out into the world, so he joined the service and experienced Vietnam first hand. He says that as a kid who pledged allegiance to the flag every morning throughout his school years, he believed he was a born and bred American. In fact, he could recite the name of every president of the United States. But when he arrived for training, things weren't as he would have imagined. Like all men of different ethnicities, Alcain was treated differently to which he eventually adjusted.

At the end of his service in the military, Alcain wanted to return home.

"(I) came home to reconnect, to learn who I was," he says. "I had to learn because all those (military) people were thinking I'm not American. So who am I? While in the library reading about the political history of Hawaiʻi, learning about the culture ... all the stuff the kupuna were trying to tell me made sense to me now. Now I felt more understanding."

Once he was ready to focus on tending to the property, Alcain says, "I basically came here to heal the land and heal myself," he says. "It's a continuing journey. So when I do laʻau work or other things, it's easier to help others when you're healing yourself or feel good about yourself.

"Laʻau lapaʻau is Hawaiian medicine, and laʻau is just the short form," he explains. "Laʻau is basically the plants, the herbs ... laʻau lapaʻau is the whole practice of Hawaiian herbs. I do some of it because I learned from Papa Auwae on the Big Island, who was the master of laʻau lapaʻau on that island. There was a big group of us learning from him. And then there was Auntie Marie, our laʻau kupuna on Molokaʻi ... who would (mutually) exchange knowledge with Papa Auwae. Then when Papa passed away, I worked with Auntie Marie a lot. It gave me a little stronger foundation in working with the laʻau. Through the practices of learning and understanding the spiritual paths, I wanted to

apply that work to the homestead other than just to do farming.

"The spiritual part is 100 percent of the work," states Alcain. "When I was done with the training, Papa said, 'Spiritual is 80 percent; the laʻau, which is the medicine, is 20 percent.' You have to be strong in the spiritual, then the laʻau can be the medicine. If you're not strong in the spiritual, you're not pono with yourself, then the laʻau cannot work. It's when you connect yourself to Ke Akua (God), that's the spiritual part, and you start understanding Ke Akua and loving him, that you can turn around and start loving yourself, then put out that energy. With that you become confident with that unknown support."

Alcain is a one-man show when not assisted by people who find him through the World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms, or WWOOFers, as they're known.

Alcain says, "A lot of them say, 'I want to care for the land,' but they don't understand that they have to care for themselves first. Know who you are."

He asks them who they are, from whom they're descended. "There is something about you that makes you who you are," Alcain says. "There are memories in there, so you need to understand what kind of memories are there and how you are connected to them. For the Europeans who crossed the Atlantic, they were already on the verge of not knowing themselves because they were running away from themselves when they came to America.

"That's why they like to do yoga; they gravitate to this different energy that's not them. They're seeking, but they don't know what they're seeking. They're seeking good energy, but is it them?

"Yoga is calming so you think it's working; it makes you feel connected a little bit," he explains. "Yoga is from India; meditation is mostly Asian, you know what I mean? Yes, it helps you feel good, but the spiritual essence isn't growing. And you need three components in laʻau lapaʻau — you heal the mind, the body and the spirit. You need to be true to who you are. When you understand that and apply yourself to the land, the connection is better."

At ʻĀina Pulapula, Alcain grows native

At ʻĀina Pulapula, Alcain grows a wide range of fruits and vegetables, enough to feed the WWOOFers, school groups and many others.

Hawaiian plants, vegetables and fruits on 3.5 acres of a six-acre plot of land. Much hard work has gone into clearing the land, preparing the soil, planting the seeds, and nurturing and growing the plants and trees. As Alcain puts it, "… there are many hands involved."

He takes us into the area where he grows native Hawaiian plants and explains how many endemic species we have lost. We also get a lesson on how people unknowingly destroy plants when going deep into the forest.

"You have to be careful when you walk in there," says Alcain, pointing to the ground where Chase is walking to get a picture of native maile. "You almost stepped on it. You see this plant?" he asks, pointing to a tiny green shoot that could pass for a weed. "This is the koʻo koʻolau, specific to Molokaʻi. It doesn't grow anyplace else in the wild other than on Molokaʻi."

I take a few steps and almost step on a small weed before he cautions me. "That's the sandalwood," he says, pointing to the weed. Knowing how rare they are, I apologize. I feel like an elephant trying to avoid stepping on ants.

He says, "No … you don't know so I'm pointing it out to you, yeah. Like I said, just using the maile as an example; it's no fault to you! It's just that you don't know. And if you don't know, you're going to do what you do. Like when I first started gathering seeds and going into the wild to get them, I used to do the same thing. 'Oh, that plant!' Not looking down, I'm stepping on the babies. Then I started to understand. That's why when you have rare plants, only certain people can go to collect them. You're thinking you're doing good by saving a plant, but from here to there to get to that plant, you're killing a lot of other plants."

Alcain continues, "This ʻilima is medicine. The ʻaʻaliʻi is another medicine." I can only associate ʻilima with the lei to which he says it's often used in teas to aid the respiratory system. "A lot of plants have a lot of properties. And once we've lost the identity of the plant, we have also lost the use of the plant."

He points out the koʻoloa ʻula, a native plant to Oʻahu; the kokiʻo keʻokeʻo, the white hibiscus of Kauaʻi; and the rare uhiuhi, an endemic legume, of which Alcain says there are probably less than 20 in the wild and it only grows on the Big Island and Kauaʻi.

Alcain sees a correlation between the loss of native Hawaiian plants, animal life and the people over hundreds of years.

"A lot of the (ancient) knowledge was lost," he says, referring to the period following Western contact when the Hawaiian population plummeted due to numerous Western-introduced diseases. "Not only are the plants rare … our native birds too. You have to understand when Cook came, the Hawaiian population got decimated. The native birds

lived in our native forests. If they don't have the environment, they cannot survive. Same thing with our plants. And then it goes down to the people. Hawaiians are (now) struggling. All they know of who they are is disappearing; it tells you a story."

In a time when the Hawaiian people didn't understand the concept of owning land, whereas Caucasians did, the Hawaiian people ended up living on land with a 100-year lease that has long since expired. Many of them have been awarded Hawaiian homestead lands, but so many more have been on a decades-long waiting list. Many have died while waiting.

Alcain says, "When you know that relationship of you as a Hawaiian to the land, you're going to understand it's a lot of work. It's not like, 'Okay, I got my platter, where's the line?' But that's what a lot of Hawaiians are waiting for. They're waiting for the platter because they don't know how to identify themselves to the land, how hard that work is going to be. It's all about not really knowing who they are.

"What do you see when you look around?" he asks. "All these areas are homestead lands."

I reply that it's all green.

"So what does that tell you?" he asks again. After a pause, he continues, "The people are not ready. A lot of them are disconnected. That's why I say, 'You cannot criticize until you understand the issue. Understand the family issue, the homestead issue, then look at the individual history. Then you can see why it's productive or non-productive." Smiling, he says, "It's easy to judge. If I put you on the land, I want to see what you're going to do. Then you tell me … productive or non-productive. It's a struggle.

"To be 100 percent dependent on your land and the ocean is huge because everything is based on land," says Alcain. "The (Hawaiian) language is based on land. I mean, you listen to the language and it's all about the plants, the earth, the sky, the birds … it's all based on that, that's the interconnection. When you speak the language, it connects you to the plant, the ocean. When you name your people, it connects you to the land. With everything being tied to the land, it's powerful."

The sun is shining bright overhead as we walk toward the vegetable garden. I see a good variety of greens: kale, lettuce, green onion, among others. I ask if he sells these items. "We eat it," he answers.

Organizations, school groups, individuals pass through ʻĀina Pulapula, learning about the farm-to-table process, and Alcain feeds them all with what grows on the farm.

"I feed them so they can understand that this is what we do and this is what you can eat, that this is what's going on that can happen," he says. "They go in the garden, get the vegetables, make the salad. Most of the kids come from Oʻahu so it's important for them to see the process of gathering the food, cleaning it, preparing it then eating it. It's part of the program.

"We're so used to going to Costco or Safeway," he says. "Over here, it's what can I put together; you gotta be creative! For almost seven years the only thing I've bought is onion, garlic and ginger. Everything else is from the garden. I don't buy fruits … all are from the land or people exchange."

Alcain's fruit trees are plentiful, growing the likes of oranges, lemons, limes, pomelo, grapefruit, soursap, bananas, mountain apple, breadfruit, starfruit, mango, avocado, mulberry, strawberries. Did you know that only Molokaʻi can claim to grow non-GMO papaya? I didn't know either.

Alcain exchanges his fruits and vegetables for protein sources. We stop at a pen that holds two goats, a sow and her piglets sleeping under the shade. I make friends with a goat who loves the

Poi is just one of many native Hawaiian flora that grows under the care of many hands at ʻĀina Pulapula.

attention. In the background, Chase and Alcain are talking. Alcain says, "Don't think of them as pets; all these guys are food. That's how you have to look at them."

I ask if the goat has a name. "No … Food." Chase laughs and says, "In fact, they all answer to Food." "Sustainability!" shouts Alcain.

I ask Alcain if he believes Hawai'i can ever truly be self sustaining. "That's a trick question," he answers. What is the real meaning of sustainable? Mom and pop? Or a conglomerate like Monsanto? Or sugar cane or pineapple? It's easy to say, 'Let's do it!' but if we're going back to the mom and pop, then the state has to support them because how can mom and pop compete against cheaper exports from Mexico?"

He says Moloka'i can be self sustaining, but only for the people who live on the island. "All that I raise and all the deer around us … so far as meat, it's abundant. And we have a substantial amount of fish … for us. That's what people don't understand.

"When guys come here to eat, it's okay. They go to the ocean, gather, sit down and eat. But when they gather and fill up the coolers and go home, that hurts us. We cannot sustain that. Can you imagine if a hundred more of them came?"

It's hot under the afternoon sun, but 'Āina Pulapula feels like what could be heaven on Earth. "'Āina Pulapula is about healing," says Alcain. "When I first came here, it was to heal myself and heal the land. It's an everyday thing, it never ceases."

I ask if he has a message for people. Giving it some thought, he says, "Live aloha. I mean truly … live aloha. Be who you are and love that person who you are. That's being aloha. If you can love yourself in that way, then aloha will radiate out."

As I've come to understand, the main point of Alcain's words behind true sustainability is the issue of whether people are willing to sacrifice their conveniences in order to work hard, connect themselves to the land, and thus become whole again.

"It starts with sacrifice," he says, "because it comes without money. It comes with who you are and your self worth to the land. That's what it becomes."