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## Kupuna Kokua

*Allegra Fasnacht*



She can show you activities that will improve your memory. Karen "Freesia" Peterson is reaching new goals in helping seniors "give back."

Senior mentoring programs widening opportunities for elders to "give back" their gifts and talents.

For the past seven years, Karen "Freesia" Peterson has been bringing generations together through her use of Brain Gym, a program designed to use movement to enhance brain function.

Peterson successfully implemented a program on Maui called the Brain Gym Intergenerational Mentoring Program (IMP), which allows senior citizens to act as mentors for children with challenges, setting up weekly visits where kupuna (elders) work one-on-one with keiki.



Giving Back has helped connect over 150 kupuna with 600 keiki, like Brianna (left) and Naomi, giving children mentors they can trust outside of the home

The achievements of IMP and her affiliation with the Maui Long-Term Care Partnership have inspired Peterson to create another aspect for senior care, Kupuna Kokua.

“Elders need to be integrated into the fabric of society,” said Peterson, “to be able to give back their gifts and talents to the younger generation. I am appalled at the way our society discards the elderly, who are vitally important to our culture.”

Peterson has been a licensed Brain Gym instructor for over 20 years, and through her continual efforts, has successfully started her own nonprofit organization called Giving Back, founded in 1999, which is funded by local grants currently through Maui County Department of Housing and Human Concerns and Youth Programs, the state Department of Health, Injury Prevention Program on Maui, and the Fred Baldwin Memorial Foundation.

Her new pilot project, to begin this fall, she calls Kupuna Kokua, where “mobile” senior citizen volunteers who have completed Brain Gym training work as mentors for more frail seniors. They will work one-on-one using the same Brain Gym techniques that have been so successful with keiki in the past.



Elders can now choose to work one-on-one with a child or a senior. Elo (left) worked with Thelma on Brain Gym activities during her last visit to Roselani Place.

“Brain Gym consists of 26 targeted activities that use movement to enhance and improve memory, focus, concentration, balance, energy levels and more,” said Peterson, “and there is strong evidence that Brain Gym can assist in improving cognitive performance in Alzheimer’s patients.” It has been shown to improve behavior, social skills, self-esteem and learning ability among children, but it also includes key benefits for seniors, such as better coordination and balance, vision and hearing, concentration and focus, energy, creativity, memory and significantly slowing the aging process.

“The idea of elders using their skills, experience, knowledge, and most of all their love to mentor has deep Hawaiian roots and deep Hawaiian wisdom,” Peterson remarked. She believes it is a significant time because the Baby Boomer generation is getting older, and Kupuna Kokua is a wonderful way for seniors to stay involved.

The Kupuna Kokua pilot will be held at Roselani Place, an assisted living residence in Kahului. The project has two main focuses, said Peterson: active well senior volunteers stay healthy and involved; and frail and at-risk elders improve their focus, balance and coordination. "This is both a preventive wellness program and 'intergenerational,'" said Peterson, "as younger seniors work with older ones, and mobile work with non-mobile, and both generations benefit."

Training for the next Brain Gym session will be held on Aug. 25 and 26, when seniors will have the chance to choose whether they would like to work with a child or a fellow elder. Training is free for people over age 55.

One of Peterson's volunteers related a story about how Brain Gym practices helped her in her daily routine. "I succumbed to a sore throat and head cold that kept me from volunteer work at the Roselani Home," she said. "I was clumsy walking about, so I decided to do some brain coordinating. It had a marked effect, and I lost the feeling of unsteadiness on the feet."

Peterson intends to expand Kupuna Kokua to other assisted living sites, such as Hale Makua and Hale Mahaolu. She also plans to be involved in the new Nisei Veterans Memorial Center, an intergenerational center in Kahului, which will house adult daycare and a preschool under the same roof. Giving Back has also joined the Lahaina Partnership, and together they will be designing and implementing programs to create a clean and sober environment for West Maui youth.

"This is my day job," said Peterson, "and it's even a night job, but it doesn't feel like work to me because it's what I believe in and love."

**For more information on Giving Back and to volunteer, call 573-3109 or visit [www.givingbackmentoring.org](http://www.givingbackmentoring.org)**