

Charter school's class of 9 graduates is its first

Kamaile Academy, once under the gun to improve, holds its commencement

By Michael Tsai

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COURTESY HEATHER MAJKOWSKI

Leionaona Marshall, valedictorian at Kamaile Academy, celebrated with her family after Saturday's graduation ceremony. She will attend Kenyon College in Ohio on a full scholarship.

Above all, Isaiah Pule says, life is about expanding boundaries.

Thus, the inquisitive young man from Waianae — who this weekend became part of the first graduating class of Kamaile Academy — couldn't wait to find out what was in store for him two years ago at a statewide conference for students interested in the hospitality industry. But when it came time to meet and mingle, Pule saw that all-too-familiar look.

"When they found out I was from Waianae, the look on their faces was shock," Pule said. "They couldn't believe that someone like me would be there."

Pule, who endured an unstable home life until just recently when he was adopted by his second foster family, didn't take offense at the reaction. He says he and other west-side kids grow up accustomed to the prejudices and preconceptions held by those who know Waianae only for its problems with homelessness, drug abuse, domestic violence and lack of emphasis on education.

And that, in part, is what made Saturday's milestone commencement ceremony so meaningful for Pule.

"It was bittersweet because I know I won't be returning to see my friends and teachers next year," Pule said. "But I also know that I have a chance to present myself outside of this community as someone from Waianae who was able to be successful with the support of our families, teachers and each other. I think we set a high bar here, and I hope that the classes who follow us will set it even higher."

Pule was one of nine students in Kamaile Academy's first graduating class and a fitting representative of how the once-embattled charter school has evolved and flourished.

Established in 1989 as Kamaile Elementary School, the school was converted into a charter school in 2007 and is now overseen by the nonprofit Hookakoo Corp.

The largest charter school in Hawaii with 930 students (70 percent Native Hawaiian) enrolled in preschool through 12th grade, Kamaile draws from a cross section of high-need populations. More than 80 percent of students qualify for free or discounted lunch, 14 percent require special-educational accommodations, 13 percent are learning English as a second language and 14 percent are homeless.

Despite strong support and participation from parents, many of whom elected to send their children to the charter school in hopes of providing them a better alternative to traditional public education, the school failed to meet minimum No Child Left Behind requirements.

In 2010 the school dismissed its top two administrators, clearing the way for it to receive School Improvement Grant funding.

The school then brought in Emma Weiss, a former social worker who had overseen the successful turnaround of an underperforming rural school in Arizona, to serve as principal. Under Weiss the school embraced a rigorous project-based learning model that requires students to publicly present and defend their work in order to advance from grade to grade.

And with each passing year the school expanded one grade at a time.

"The students in this graduating class were the guinea pigs," Weiss said, laughing. "They didn't have a class ahead of them to follow."

Star Marshall, mother of valedictorian Leionaona Marshall, was one of several parents who rallied to support the new leadership and the new initiatives.

Leionaona Marshall entered Kamaile in eighth grade. In the years since, Star Marshall has participated in every board, committee, council and program open to parents, all in an effort to secure a better education for her daughter and her daughter's classmates.

"I feel like all of them are my children," Marshall says. "I know all nine (seniors) personally and as students. I know their families. We've been through a lot of uncertainty over the years — there were times when we didn't know who the principal would be or if there would still be a school to come back to the next year — but we got through it together. That's the only way it could have worked."

Leionaona Marshall earned a scholarship to attend Kenyon College in Ohio next fall. Pule will attend the University of Rochester in New York, becoming the first in his family to attend a four-year university.

Of the remaining seven graduates, four will attend local community college, one will attend a community college in Oregon, one has joined the National Guard and another will enter a youth leadership program.