

“Ha’ina Mai Ana Ka Puana”
the story is told...

*by Luanna Peterson,
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During the first two weeks of June 2012, **Roberto Perez**, the Environmental Education and Biodiversity Conservation Program Director for the **Antonio Núñez Jiménez Foundation for Nature and Humanity** in Havana, Cuba, visited the island of Oahu in Hawaii. Roberto’s historical two-week visit to Hawaii served as a catalyst for much bigger things to come! His stay here was borne from an idea, a thought, a passing suggestion, really.

Months before his arrival, **Jesse Lipman**, Food Programs Coordinator at **Kokua Kalhi Valley**, and I had met one afternoon to share our experiences in Cuba. Both of us traveled to Cuba during 2011 with **Eco Cuba Network**. Our trips to Cuba had been so transformative for the both us, we knew that we couldn’t leave Cuba in Cuba. Somehow, we had to introduce Hawaii to Cuba and Cuba to our dear home. We could see the ripple effects of such a relationship even before the pebble was cast. Hawaii and Cuba share so much in common, how could the relationship not thrive and help to evolve both island nations?

It was apparent to us that Hawaii and Cuba, through their environmental, historical and agricultural landscapes, could be strong allies in their struggle to become sustainable through self-determination and horizontal collaboration across class, race, and national boundaries. Even within Hawaii, we found that collaboration amongst groups and organizations that shared similar goals, was lacking.

Cuba has progressed in the areas of sustainability, community-building, and self-determination over the years. Whether it is a result of the revolution, the will of the people, political leadership, or factors still beyond our comprehension - being the amiable acquaintances we are of this country - their accomplishments are impressive and deserve examination.

Why would we choose **Roberto Perez** to kick-start this endeavor? Was it simply that he was Cuban? Roberto was the natural pick for us to begin this journey for reasons beyond the obvious. Yes, he is an internationally-renowned permaculturist and sustainability expert, and yes he is a wonderful representative of his culture and people, but it was more than that. *Last summer when I met him in Cuba, the first thing I noticed about him besides his laughter and love for the spoken word, was his sincere desire to be an agent of change not only in his own country but the world over.* His enthusiasm was infectious. Sitting there with him, as Cuban jazz threatened to drown out our impassioned conversation, I thought why not bring Roberto to Hawai'i? I had no idea how I would do this, but the thought was a start.

When Jesse and I decided to bring Roberto, we immediately began to contact individuals and organizations in the community who we thought would be interested in not only meeting Roberto but in building a long-term friendship with Cuba. **Soul De Cuba, Mohala farms, Kahumanu farms, and Kokua Kalihu Valley Foundation, Ola Hawai'i 2020, and Malama Aina Foundation**, were some the first groups to support our vision. **Jesus Puerto**, owner of Soul De Cuba, the only Cuban restaurant in Hawai'i, had been working to establish Honolulu as a sister city to Cuba when we met with him.

After meeting with various people in the community, we began to see that the timing of Roberto's visit was a small part of a larger synergistic movement that was taking place. People are beginning to realize that their struggle is not theirs alone, that their story, though unique in many ways, is one that is being lived all over the world. We are realizing that as long as we are riding this wave together, we may as well look to one another - here and across oceans, for support and guidance.

Growing up in Hawai'i, my elders often provided metaphors to explain important life lessons. My favorite was the fishing net and its symbol as a strong community. Uncle Loso would say—"a strong village is a fishing net—made up of many knots, all of them needed and tied together, and all of them strong. If one is

missing, the net falls apart and the village goes hungry.” I see Roberto and the many teachers here, there and everywhere, as the knots in our community that can bring us abundance—so long as we are together and one.

Getting Roberto here was quite an adventure. Jesse and I took this project on, knowing we both had full-time work to tend to and the responsibility of family. In hindsight, we would have liked to have delegated more responsibility early on so as ensure key tasks were accomplished in a timely manner. Moreover, the logistics of arranging travel for a Cuban citizen was quite a ride. *We literally did not hear word of his visa approval until a few days before he was set to travel to Hawai'i.* The US embassy does not make it easy for Cubans to travel for reasons that still boggle my mind.

In the end, Roberto arrived. The minute his foot touched this island, his adventures took off and did not abate until the day he left. *Word got around that a Cuban sustainability expert was here, and soon, everyone -- I mean everyone! - - wanted to meet him.* Roberto had a lot to do with his popularity and demand during his stay here. There is something about him (and in fact the Cuban people) that is very akin to local people in Hawai'i. He is sincere, generous, gregarious, and gives his whole self to any task—big or small. From dinner dates with Hawaiian elders to visits to farms from one tip of the island to the other, he never wanted for something to do.

His first week was at **Ho'oulu Aina**, a nature preserve in **Kalihi Valley**. There he worked with migrant families, helped to build a traditional **Chukkese** underground oven, tended the garden with grandparents, and sat with local farmers over beer as they discussed *bokashi* fertilizer and the similarities in their environment. “We have this plant in Cuba,” Roberto would say. As they walked throughout the valley, they would ask one another, “and this, how does this grow on your land?” Eyes would light up as they realized that *Noni*, for example, had made its way from Polynesia to the Caribbean. No one knew how, but somehow a bit of them had made its way across the Pacific. It was a beautiful exchange.

From there, he visited **Wai'anāe Valley**. He stayed at **Kahumanu farms**, where **Father Phil Harmon** was his host. Wai'anāe was an important place for Roberto to visit. This dry coast is home to the largest community of Native Hawaiians. Visitors and locals alike often overlook the spiritual and historical significance of this part of the island. Settled over 2,000 years ago, the district of Wai'anāe is believed to be one of the first areas on O'ahu to be settled by the ancient Hawaiians. Being on the leeward side, the Hawaiians have had to adapt to regular droughts. These harsh conditions shaped the values and resourcefulness of the people of Wai'anāe. Overtime, new challenges and occupation by the military and foreign interests have continuously beset this community. Nonetheless, the tenacity and strength of Wai'ane has stood the test of time. The community welcomed Roberto graciously.

From here, Roberto's journey began to spread across Oahu at the speed of light. Jesse and I begin to lose sight of the details and had to trust that he was being taken care of. *I was flooded with requests for his time from morning to night.* He stayed on the North shore of Oahu at **Waialua Farms**, hosted a film viewing at various churches, was interviewed on **Beth-Ann Kozlovich**, a **Hawaii Public Radio** show, presented with **Ola Hawaii 2020**, and on, and on.

He left as soon as he came. What did he leave behind? Roberto brought our community together, sparked an interest in Cuba that went beyond Fidel and Elian Gonzales, and brought fresh ideas to our own work in creating a just, self-determined and sustainable Hawaii. Last but not least, he took a bit of Hawaii with him—our Aloha and our story. "*Ha'ina Mai Ana Ka Puana*," the story is told.

Let it be told the world over, with the hope that our voices become the net that brings the abundance that was always our birthright.