

“E `onipa`a i ka `imi na`auao”: Be Steadfast in the Seeking of Knowledge

The definition of steadfast is to be resolutely or dutifully firm and unwavering. To say that this graduating class has been steadfast is an understatement. Queen Lili`uokalani’s motto is a powerful and heartfelt message that may hold different meanings to others, but to me, E `onipa`a i ka `imi na`auao is built on five foundational characteristics: Focus, Determination, Grit, Resilience, and Faith.

For some of us, school was a continued journey that brought us to our next milestone of life. We were excited for the possibility of pursuing our interests, learning about ourselves as we grew, and exploring a newfound freedom. For others, like myself, this journey did not follow a perfectly charted plan. Some of us battled through life’s school of hard knocks, only to wake up one day and realize that we were meant for more. College was about starting a new chapter in our lives, one where we could fuel our passion and fulfill our life’s purpose. We thought about ourselves, our families; we claimed our self-worth and let our focus keep us motivated to achieve our goals.

My story starts as an eighteen-year-old mom just out of high school and not knowing what to do with my life. I was on government aid, living in affordable state housing, and feeling broken down from a toxic relationship. Though I knew that a college degree was important, it felt daunting even to think about breaking free from the chains that society had bound me with. I jumped from major to major, none of which worked out. I just about gave up, nearly slipping into oblivion. I was working two jobs day and night only to end up overwhelmed, exhausted, and angry with myself for letting my family down. My glowing light at the end of a dark tunnel flickered, dimmed, and almost went out; but I caught myself. With help from a spunky little girl,

my daughter, I rediscovered my focus, and with grit and determination, I kept my flame alive. I re-enrolled at Kapiolani Community College and dedicated myself to learning about the hospitality industry.

My hospitality degree took me places I never dreamed of, managing at the most beautiful luxury resorts on Kaua`i, in Washington, and in Las Vegas. Through managing diverse employees, I developed a passion for helping others fight through their struggles and realize their fullest potentials. I became a voice and a resource for those that felt they had no right to stand up for themselves. Finally, I found my place in the world. Then came the layoff ...

The small department I was running was outsourced, leaving me and my employees with nowhere to go. My world collapsed, and I lost myself. So much of my identity was tied to my career, and losing it was like losing a large piece of myself. It was my children who kept me grounded and connected to reality. Remembering where I started, all that I'd been through, all my accomplishments, and the future I wanted for my children ignited my fire for knowledge once again. I had weathered storms worse than this. I was strong; I was resilient; and I refused to give up. Turning tragedy into a victory, I enrolled in one of UH West Oahu's distance education programs to pursue the passion I had discovered while managing. Distance education provided me with an amazing opportunity to continue my pursuit of knowledge that, prior to this, had seemed literally impossible. Being a full-time working mom, and the sole provider for my family, moving to Oahu to attend college in a traditional face-to-face setting was simply not an option for me. UH West Oahu's distance program gave me the flexibility to work around my busy schedule, without sacrificing the content and quality of the education I was receiving. As a result, I am graduating with a BA in Social Sciences with a focus in Psychology and Substance Abuse & Addiction Studies. There were moments I doubted myself. What was I thinking? Am I

too old to go back to school? Could I even do it? Once again, it was grit, determination, and faith that carried me through returning to full-time work, full-time school, in addition to being a full-time mom.

The knowledge we acquire is something that never fades; no one can take it away. My hospitality education and experience was not in vain. I jumped at the opportunity to be a lecturer with Kaua'i Community College's Hospitality and Tourism program. It's a second job for me, but I love being able to pass on my knowledge to, and shape the lives of, future generations. Graduation may be the end of a chapter in my quest to obtain a bachelor's degree, but it is certainly not where my story ends. My next chapter begins with graduate school at Columbia University via distance education, and from there on out, the sky's the limit.

We all know what it's like to be firm and unwavering, steadfast, holding strong to our morals, our values, our traditions, and having faith that our educational knowledge would secure a brighter tomorrow for not only ourselves but also for our loved ones and future generations to come.

Although we come from many diverse backgrounds, we are brought together by one united goal: our quest for knowledge. For us, today marks a monumental occasion. We celebrate the achievement that our focus, determination, grit, resilience, and faith has bestowed on us. Today, we sit at the foot of the throne of perpetual knowledge, ready to receive our crown of victory and take our rightful place as the leaders of our destiny. A destiny made possible by E`onipa`a i ka `imi na`auao. Congratulations Class of 2022!