



Star Advertiser

Film on Transgender 'Kumu' Set for April World Premiere

By Mike Gordon – March 23, 2014:

When films have focused on issues facing transgender individuals, they often told stories filled with discrimination, violence and disrespect. Filmmakers Dean Hamer and Joe Wilson were familiar with that, having explored the LGBT community in rural America in their film "Out in the Silence."

But then they met Hina Wong-Kalu, a Hawaiian māhū, or transgender woman, who is known more for her role as a teacher, community leader and cultural practitioner than for a label attached to her name. In Wong-Kalu they saw a story of acceptance that could happen only in Hawai'i.

The result is their new documentary "Kumu Hina."

For a year, Hamer and Wilson were given unlimited access to Wong-Kalu's life, including her new marriage to a Tongan man. The filmmakers envisioned the trials and tribulations of an unusual Polynesian couple dealing with the most universal of human emotions.

"It's a dramatic story of life and love in Hawai'i that no one has ever seen on film before," Wilson said. "When we met Hina our view changed about what kind of world was possible. We thought Hina's life and the way things play out here in Hawai'i could be a model to share with the rest of the world."

Hamer and Wilson were coming off two years on the road with "Out in the Silence" when they met Wong-Kalu.

"We were immediately captivated by her presence and also who she is and how she lived her life," Wilson said. "We were stunned by the difference between Hawai'i and the continental U.S. in terms of acceptance and inclusion of an openly transgender woman. She is a community leader, an empowered person who is a prominent teacher."

Wong-Kalu, a 41-year-old Kamehameha Schools graduate who lives in Nu'uuanu, is cultural director at Hālau Lōkahi, a public charter school that incorporates Hawaiian culture and history into the curriculum. She's also chairwoman of the O'ahu Island Burial Council, which oversees Hawaiian burial sites and ancestral remains.

"Have you ever heard of an openly transgender woman teaching?" Wilson said. "It's almost unimaginable."

The film so impressed organizers of the Hawai'i International Film Festival that they picked "Kumu Hina" as the closing-night selection of their 15th annual Spring Showcase. The April 10 screening at the Hawai'i Theatre will be the film's world premiere. Afterward the filmmakers want to screen it at festivals and then plan to air it on PBS in 2015.

Wong-Kalu, who is pleased with the film, said she doesn't want to be viewed as different or special.

"I want to be someone who is acknowledged as Hina, as myself," she said. "I feel it is more important for people to be acknowledged by their name and the merits of their name rather than something like 'transgender.'"

In agreeing to have the most personal moments of her life documented, Wong-Kalu sought to promote compassion as well as understanding.

"It was an opportunity to say to the world that people who are māhū have a great many of contributions to our community and our families and our circles," she said. "I am no different — no better, no worse. I am just a normal person."

If that is the heart of the story Hamer and Wilson told, then Wong-Kalu is undeniably the soul. The filmmakers viewed her philosophy as extremely important, especially against an overwhelming backdrop of negative media images.

"What we also need to see are the positive reflections of the lives of transgender people so we know them as full human beings who are members of our families and communities," Wilson said. "When we met Hina and saw she was a great symbol of this, we thought it was extremely important to share her story."

To learn more about "Kumu Hina," go to KumuHina.tumblr.com

AND that's a wrap ...

Mike Gordon is the Star-Advertiser's film and television writer.



Hina Wong-Kalu, far right, performs with her students at Hālau Lōkahi, a public charter school that incorporates Hawaiian language, culture, and history into the curriculum.