Merrie Monarch Festival Celebrates 50 Years
By Dr. Chuck Kelley

This week, in Hilo, the Merrie Monarch Festival has been celebrating its 50th anniversary. Tickets were sold out for the celebration, featuring an arts and crafts fair, hula demonstrations, a grand parade through downtown Hilo and even a King Kalākaua beard contest.

The festival is capped by a three-day hula competition, which ends today. Altogether, 26 hula hālau (hula troupes) – 15 from O‘ahu, four from Hawai‘i Island, two from Maui, two from Kaua‘i and three from California – have been competing. This year, in honor of the 50th anniversary, former winners of the competition also came back to the stage and performed on exhibition night. The high-definition TV broadcast on KFVE (channel 5) holds the distinction of being Hawai‘i’s most-watched, longest-running local TV program.

I must admit that I have never attended the Merrie Monarch Festival in person. My participation has been limited to watching the incredible performances – in awe – on television. But even with this limited involvement, I have developed tremendous respect for those who participate and for the importance of this event to our Island culture.

Every aspect of the festival is steeped in history and culture, and participants clearly take hula very seriously. There are exacting protocols that must be followed, and years of dedicated practice are needed to learn the required skills. It all comes together in a week-long extravaganza that contributes greatly to the richness and beauty of our community.

Begun in 1963 by the Hawai‘i Island Chamber of Commerce and later continued by the private, nonprofit Merrie Monarch Festival organization, today the festival is the world’s premier forum for people of all ages to display their skills and knowledge of the art of hula, both ancient and modern.

The festival honors the legacy of King David Kalākaua – “the Merrie Monarch” – who inspired the perpetuation of Hawai‘i’s traditions, native language and arts. Proceeds from the festival support educational scholarships, workshops, seminars, symposiums and the continuation of the event itself.

Like many important events that serve to strengthen Hawai‘i’s visitor industry, the Merrie Monarch Festival is supported, in part, by the Hawai‘i Tourism Authority (HTA, which gets its funding, in turn, from Hawai‘i’s hotel room tax). It has earned this support because Hawai‘i’s thriving local culture – of which the festival is a shining example – plays a vital role in making our state an alluring destination for millions of travelers from around the globe.

The festival draws visitors and residents, spectators and participants from around the globe to experience hula at its best. The HTA estimates the event generates $1.42 million in visitor spending for the state. It also helps thousands worldwide to learn about the history and culture of Hawai‘i.

“HTA’s funding allows the Merrie Monarch Festival to be broadcast live on HD TV and streamed online across the world for everyone to enjoy,” said Keli‘i Wilson, HTA director of Hawaiian Cultural Affairs. “It brings a piece of Hawai‘i and our host culture to people who are not able to travel to the island. We are proud to be a part of an event that honors our culture and provides both visitors and residents a unique experience.”

At Outrigger, we strive to promote the local culture wherever we do business. Here in Hawai‘i, this means helping visitors experience such examples of culture as the hula, which is often performed at our hotels and resorts throughout the state.

We are proud to see members of our Outrigger® ‘ohana and their extended families participating in the Merrie Monarch Festival each year. Char Ka‘olu Luning (Outrigger Enterprises Group Human Resources) has been...
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going to the competition since 1982, several times as a group hula dancer and more recently as kōkua (helper) with Hālau Mohala 'Ilima (Kumu Mapuana de Silva).

Lono Padilla (Outrigger Waikiki Front Desk) has participated at the competition in a variety of ways, competing with Ka Pā Hula O Kamehameha (Kumu Holoua Stender) and this week making lei for Hālau O ka Ua Kani Lehua (Kumu Johnny Lum Ho).

Patricia “PK” Ka‘ahanui (Outrigger Enterprises Group Account Services) has attended a few times over the years to support her ‘ohana. Her niece Māhealani Mika Hirao-Solem of Hula Hālau ‘O Kamuela (Kumu Kau‘ionalani Kamana‘o and Kunewa Mook) was honored as Miss Aloha Hula in 2010.

We congratulate the Merrie Monarch Festival on its first 50 years of success and thank the organizers and participants for everything they do to promote the culture and help make Hawai‘i such an extraordinary place. 58

Photo left: Lono Padilla (standing 4th from right) with Ka Pā Hula O Kamehameha 2003

Photo above: Māhealani Mika Hirao-Solem Miss Aloha Hula 2010