

Stacy Sproat-Beck

Past ritzy Princeville, beyond the trendy shops of Hanalei, over one-lane river bridges sits a breathtaking site of luscious greens, deep navy blue mountains, a veritable portal to ancient Hawai'i: Waipā. Executive Director Stacy Sproat-Beck tells us about her life's work here.

BY KRISTEN NEMOTO | PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAROD POWELL

Stacy Sproat-Beck wears slippers to work. The mountain peak of Mamalahoa to the coastline of Hanalei Bay is her office. Sixteen hundred acres of *kalo* (taro) are her co-workers, and volunteers and full-time staff members are her family. Hazardous work conditions include splinter-sized leeches and gigantic snails, yet easily defeated with one squish of her hand. While her title is the Executive Director of Kaua'i's Waipā Foundation, Sproat-Beck is not afraid to get her hands dirty. It is — in fact — a criterion that has been passed down to her from generations before.

Can you tell me the background history of the Waipā Foundation and how it all got started?

When I was in high school, the land that the Waipā Foundation sits on today was up to be sold as a resort community. My family, along with countless others, were against the idea of turning one of the few remaining *ahupua'a* (land division) into another gated complex that's blocked off to the public. My father (David Sproat) was one of the founders of Waipā, and he helped propose and build the foundation to become a living and hands-on learning community center.

How did your own path lead you to become the current executive director?

My family and I have lived here for many generations. I thought it would be a perfect fit for me to be a part of this land that my family has helped build and maintain. After graduating from University of Southern California, I was looking around for jobs in L.A. Then the Rodney King riots happened. I decided it was time to move home. As Waipā was starting up when I moved back, I became inspired by my father's involvement and decided to be a full-time member of the team. In 1994, after he became the Fire Chief of the Kaua'i Fire Department, I decided it would be the ultimate opportunity to help restore an entire watershed.

What is it about the Waipā Foundation that brings the community together?

There are not many opportunities for young people here who go off to get an education and want to do something other than work in the visitor industry. When I moved home, I decided I needed to create something for [myself] to do, as well as for other people here who want to come

back and work with the community. Through the Waipā Foundation, we host everything from a weekly farmer's market and an annual food-and-music festival to the home base for organic and Hawaiian plant gardens. A recent development of a community kitchen, poi mill and *hale imu* (underground oven) will serve as a support system for local farmers and food vendors. Waipā has become this inclusive and not exclusive place. It's a place for people and families to come and feel connected to each other and the land again.

Through all of the amazing events and projects that the Waipā Foundation hosts and contributes to the community, can you name a favorite?

When we have school children come down to learn about the land and how they can help contribute to protect it. They're just amazing. Not only are they good at catching snails in the *lo'i* (taro patch) but they come with an open heart to the hands-on learning that takes place. There's an importance to share our history and culture with our *keiki* (children). We need to pass it down to each generation so they may take over one day.

What kind of message do you hope the Waipā Foundation could send to people who come or hear about it?

Our Hawaiian cultural connection to the land and its resources is so strong and such a loving relationship that it was often considered kinship. Our ancestors deeply understood how much the natural resources meant to them because it was their survival. They loved the resources because the resources supported them, and they knew and respected all the beautiful things about them. Today, we've lost that connection. Many of us have lost that connection in general. And I think much of our society is to the point where we see land and resources as a source of our recreation, which is a far different relationship than what we had with it prior. But because we see our land so much as just a global community, we don't see the effects of our consumption. And so I feel like connecting with the *'āina* (land) and rekindling that connection and that relationship of how interrelated we are is something that will help the natural world and ourselves. I think the Waipā Foundation is emblematic to the mission of being aware and more responsible to the very place we live and call our home.

