



**AS ADVOCATES** of making learning fun for all of their kids, Jennifer Taira (pictured above, left) and Laurie Rubin have easily attracted hundreds of children looking to be a part of “something fun” while allowing them to gain the right experience for future productions in theatre and music. Made possible through the support of ABC Stores and by a \$5,000 grant from the Honolulu Mayor’s Office of Culture and the Arts, “Peace on Your Wings” features 37 Ohana Arts students from over 15 schools around the island.

It’s four in the afternoon on a humid Tuesday and hoards of perspiring children trample into room 31 of the Hongwanji Mission School. Perhaps it’s the cool air conditioner that’s attracting them or it’s a place to play catch-up with their friends. Whatever the excuse, they’re definitely excited to be here. A place where they can play and be “themselves,” at the rehearsal room of the nonprofit musical program Ohana Arts.

“OK everyone!” shouts Ohana Arts co-founder and associate artistic director Cari Lee, who quickly asserts her command with a hearty “shave-and-a-haircut” melodic clap, that’s immediately followed by a “two-bits” clap response from the young crowd. “Let’s get started.”

With ninja-like reflexes, the nearly 40 mixtures of incredibly short and exceptionally tall young people get into place to rehearse a scene from their original new production, “Peace on Your Wings” — a musical written by associate artistic director Laurie Rubin and artistic director Jennifer Taira.

“We have kids from various different backgrounds,” says Taira, who also is one of the co-founders of Ohana Arts. “This past summer we had kids from over 20 different schools. Some are home schooled, some from private or public schools ... they wouldn’t normally all be together but then they come here and become best of friends.”

In 2010, Taira and Rubin — both accomplished musicians living in New York City at the time, whose credits included performances



at the Carnegie Hall, the Millennium Stage at The John F. Kennedy Center and The White House in Washington, D.C. — decided to move to Taira’s hometown of Hawaii to help spread the dream of making musical programs accessible to all children.

As Taira remembered her experience at the prestigious Interlochen Arts Academy, through the help of the Emerson Electric Scholarship — an award that is given to just one student from each state — she felt the urge and the utmost importance for other students to be able to have such an opportunity.

“It’s great to have it here for our kids,” Taira says. “And then hopefully it’ll grow and attract people from all over the world to come and be a part of the program.”

“There’s no reason why other students in Hawaii shouldn’t have this opportunity,” adds Rubin, also the co-founder, a mezzo-soprano and resident voice teacher for Ohana Arts. “There’s a lot of great performers and teachers but what there isn’t is an opportunity for other kids to come



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together with other kids from all over the world because Hawaii is so far from everything.”

Shayna Yasunaga, an 8th grader at Washington Middle School, who will play the lead Sadako in the upcoming “Peace on Your Wings,” lights up with a mega-watt smile when she’s asked about what makes Ohana Arts so special.

“Oh gosh where do I start,” gushes Yasunaga, as she goes on to explain her past “amazing” two summers in the Ohana Arts program. “Normally, I like to sleep in but this past summer I’d be the first one waiting for my parents in the car ... I just love it. Everyone is great. I used to be really shy but now once I’m on stage, I feel like I can do anything.”

Ohana Arts’ fifth summer production, “Peace on Your Wings” is an original story inspired by the life of Sadako Sasaki, the young Japanese girl who, despite being diagnosed with leukemia after the atomic bomb was dropped near her home in Hiroshima, persevered and wished for nothing more than peace.

If there was ever a show to represent Ohana Arts so perfectly, Taira says, this would be it. “The emphasis of our program has always been about creating community,” she notes. “And our mission is about creating peace through the arts and bonds that you feel the arts can bring about. Eventually we want to branch out and extend that to the international community.”

Excited about the program’s first original musical production, Rubin is especially motivated to take the show on the road to the neighbor islands, music festivals and possibly to New York City where her and Taira’s dreams of performing have already come true.

“The sky’s the limit in terms of what you can do with a new production,” Rubin smiles. “And our kids can do it really well.”

The premiere will take place at Leeward Community College Theatre on Nov. 20, 21 and 22. Tickets are \$30 at the door, \$25 for premium seating, \$15 for general admission and \$10 for students. To purchase tickets, go to [ohanaarts.org](http://ohanaarts.org).