




Molokai

A Dwindling Kalaupapa Population Honors 1st Exiles With Tributes And Tears

Despite the painful history, many former Hansen's disease patients have chosen to remain even after the government freed them from quarantine.



By Brittany Lyte    / January 8, 2023

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KALAUPAPA, Molokai — Gathered in the corrosive salt air at the Kalaupapa pier, a dozen people listened to a moving Hawaiian language reading of the royal government edict that criminalized Hansen's disease and outcast those afflicted by it to Hawaii's leprosy colony.



MOLOKAI

Former Hansen's disease patient Meli Watanuki, 88, wiped her eyes with a tissue pulled from the pocket of her puffer vest.

"This is a celebration of our people who are buried here," she said Friday. "It reminds me of my husband who is buried here, too. I remember all my friends."

The solemn ceremony marked the anniversary of the arrival of the first dozen patients on Jan. 6, 1866 under a measure to protect the rest of society from a then-little understood and incurable infectious disease.



Brittany Lyte/Civil Beat/2023

The ceremony featured a dozen lei etched with the names of the first Hansen's disease patients who were forcibly removed from families and taken to the isolated Kalaupapa peninsula on Jan. 6, 1866.

The event was [part of Kalaupapa Month](#), a designation enacted by former Gov. David Ige last year to honor and remember the thousands of disease-stricken victims who were brutally separated from their families and forced into permanent exile.

Hansen's disease, commonly referred to as leprosy, is an infectious disease that, if left untreated, can cripple the hands and feet and cause blindness. The disease was long feared to be highly contagious, but it's now known that it does not spread so easily.

After the discovery of a cure, the Hawaii state government in 1969 lifted the quarantine that for over a century forced roughly 8,000 people to live in isolation at the foot of the world's tallest sea cliffs. But many former patients chose to remain in Kalaupapa voluntarily as full-time residents.

For some patients, the peninsula was the only home they had ever known. Others had been abandoned by their family members outside the settlement.

Nine of Kalaupapa's former Hansen disease patients are living. Four of them choose to reside in the settlement with support from the state Health Department, which provides them with furnished homes, nursing staff and stipends for food and clothing.

Another two patients left in recent months to receive specialized medical care in Honolulu. It's unclear whether they will return.

January is not only an apt time to commemorate the lives lost in the former leprosy colony, but also to remember that in Kalaupapa the dead never really die.

Hawaiians buried the deceased in secret with the belief that their bones, or *iwi*, contained a person's spiritual essence. This essence would absorb into the earth, permeating the land and the people who steward it, according to traditional Hawaiian burial tenets.



Miki'ala Pescaia, a Kalaupapa National Historical Park ranger, and her husband Keoni Pescaia, a machine operator for the National Park Service, honored the first 12 Hansen's disease patients to be exiled at the leprosy colony.

In this way, the Hawaiian dead were believed to retain an invisible but pervasive influence on the living. With roughly 8,000 patient burials amassed in the 157 years since the arrival of the first exiles, the mana, or supernatural force, of those who died on the Kalaupapa peninsula is palpable to those who walk the land today, said Miki'ala Pescaia, a [Kalaupapa National Historical Park](#) ranger whose leprosy-stricken ancestors were banished to the colony.

"The bones, the bodies that lie in these lands, for Hawaiians they believed they were part of the great collective," said Pescaia, who presided over the afternoon tribute to the first 12 patients in Kalawao amid a sea of mostly unmarked graves.

"Mana and aloha were replenished back into these lands so that abundance could be perpetuated for all of us to enjoy," she continued. "We're all part of

the story.”

Most of the people banished to Kalaupapa were of Hawaiian heritage.

These beliefs underscore how a place with such sordid history could become a refuge for the many former Hansen’s disease patients who chose to continue living on the rugged outcropping of Molokai despite the 1969 repeal of the Hawaii law that had sequestered them there until death.

Watanuke, who was 18 when she was diagnosed with Hansen’s disease in her native American Samoa, moved to Kalaupapa of her own volition after a second bout of illness in Honolulu in the 1960s left her abandoned by her husband and young son. Living in the settlement, she made friends and remarried.

She now co-operates a Kalaupapa tour company, which is on pause due to Covid-19 restrictions imposed by the state Health Department. She also works as a cashier at the Kalaupapa Store and tidies the yard of St. Philomena Catholic Church in the original Kalawao Settlement area for the National Park Service. She attends church daily.



A lei is placed on the rock wall outside St. Philomena Catholic Church in Kalawao on the isolated Kalaupapa peninsula. The lei is etched with the name of one of the first two Hansen's disease patients who were forcibly removed from their families and left to die at Kalaupapa on Jan. 6, 1866.

Kalaupapa is also the original resting place of saints, including Father Damien who devoted a third of his life to [helping residents of the leprosy colony](#) before he contracted the disfiguring disease and died in 1889.

When Damien's remains were exhumed in 1936 and reburied in his native Belgium, Sister Alicia Damien Lau said the door to the trunk of the hearse inexplicably flung open on the roughly four-mile drive from [his burial site in Kalawao](#) to the Kalaupapa airport.

"It was his soul jumping out because he wanted to stay in Kalaupapa," Lau said.

Patients were angered in 2005 when Mother Marianne Cope was exhumed from the settlement 87 years after her death and returned to Syracuse, NY

where [the Franciscian nun began her ministry](#).

But because she had osteoporosis, only a small collection of bone fragments could be extracted from Kalaupapa's volcanic dirt.

This was a relief to some of the patients who revered the saint for her [dedication to Hawaii's outcast leprosy victims](#) despite the risks to her own health.



Sister Alicia Damien Lau, a Catholic nun who lives in Kalaupapa for the benefit of the last living former Hansen's disease patients, stands outside the St. Philomena Catholic Church in Kalawao.

"It's like Miki'ala said," noted Lau, one of two Catholic nuns who reside in Kalaupapa for the benefit of the last living resident patients. "The remains mix with the land and they live on in us as we remember the history of this place."

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