

Elizabeth Reilly

The Livable Hawaii Kai Hui president works to protect the urban growth boundaries of East Honolulu

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"Our organization is really big on the process, on how you arrive is just as important as the end result. So community engagement is vitally important." –

Elizabeth Reilly, President, Livable Hawaii Kai Hui

Elizabeth Reilly says she always knew she wanted to live in Hawaii, where she has been working persistently for more than a decade as president of Livable Hawaii Kai Hui to protect its lands and cultural resources, especially in East Honolulu.

"I was destined either for Hawaii or Puerto Rico, I just knew it," said Reilly, who along with other East Honolulu residents founded the nonprofit hui in 2004.

Reilly, 49, said that before Hawaii, she had lived mostly in New York, though she did live briefly in Arizona, where she graduated from Camelback High School, in Phoenix.

"I'm a Manhattanite," she said. "I was born and raised in Greenwich Village. My backyard was Washington Square Park; my swimming pool was the fountain at Washington Square Park, when my parents weren't around."

It was her mother, in fact, who encouraged her to pick Hawaii over Puerto Rico. Why?

"Because she said she had been here and she said the people are so loving."

Reilly, in turn, loves Hawaii, and has taken on multiple community causes as president of the Livable Hawaii Kai Hui, which these days sees its geographical boundaries of interest extending from Makapuu to Kahala, in keeping with the city's East Honolulu Sustainable Communities Plan.

Its achievements have included helping farmers at Kamilo Nui Valley stay on their farms, making sure that a wetland and heiau near the Hawaii Kai Costco are protected, ensuring public access to a part of Portlock Point, and helping prevent "vacation cabins" from being built on land along the Ka Iwi Coast.

Reilly's first Hawaii home was on Maui, starting in 1986, where she stayed until she could qualify for in-state college tuition rates. She then attended the University of Hawaii at Manoa, where she earned a bachelor's degree in marketing, paying her way by working as a secretary and operating a kiosk in Waikiki, with help from her mother, who now also lives in Hawaii. Later she worked in advertising and marketing, including as a consultant on various residential developments.

She became a full-time volunteer for Livable Hawaii Kai Hui in 2006, thanks to the financial cooperation of her husband, Rodger Reilly, a foreman at Standard Sheetmetal & Mechanical, with whom she lives in Hawaii Kai.

"He's my Prince Charming," she said.

Question: When last you were in the news, about two months ago, you were apparently happy about a DLNR (state Department of Land and Natural Resources) decision to let a proposal go through that would take that 181-acre site known as Ka Iwi mauka off the market ... with Livable Hawaii Kai Hui as the landowner. What's the latest on that?

Answer: The Trust for Public Land is working with a court appointed receivership in Utah who is tasked by the federal bankruptcy court in selling the land. Meanwhile, we are launching a capital fundraising campaign, and out of the \$4 million needed, we have \$3.5 million confirmed, so we need

only \$500,000. The challenge is going to be raising it within the timeline, which is between now and Aug. 30.

Q: At one point, years ago, the ... attorney for the landowner was saying that \$20 million was what they wanted and it was either that or go to court.

A: Well, a few things have happened ...that could have affected the land value.

One of them is that when the cabins were being proposed, the designation of the land on the makai side owned by the state and the county was still technically in urban. So when a mainland landowner looks at that entire area, they just see urban. And they look at that as potential.

So one of the first things that our organization did was ... reach out to the elected officials. ... We appealed to then-Sen. Fred Hemmings, the state Office of Planning and then-Gov. Linda Lingle, and everybody hands-down agreed that that should have been done (change the land designation from urban to conservation). ... It took a year, and it took resources, (but) it sent a loud message to developers, landowners, that the Ka Iwi coast is sacred and protected, as per the wishes of the people for generations now. ...

The other thing our organization did is we looked at the process by which those vacation cabins could actually be achieved via the land-use ordinance, and we felt there was a very weak link that needed to be tightened. So we worked with our then-elected official at the county level, who was then Councilman Charles Djou, and we went to the Department of Planning and Permitting and we asked them what would compel you to support us to improve the community process when it comes to public participation for land use on preservation land specifically for cabins. ...

We were so fortunate that the head of the department at that time, who was Mr. Henry Ing, agreed that he would look at our getting the City Council to change the land-use ordinance, so that if someone wanted to do cabins on preservation land, it wouldn't be a conditional use minor but a conditional use major.

That simple change empowered the community, and also affected the cabins on Ka Iwi mauka, because when the landowner came back to apply again, the law had changed. So then they saw the second signal from community, about the need for inclusion.

Q: I guess this all goes back to the Save Sandy Beach effort, really, doesn't it? I mean, they're the ones who kind of got the ball rolling, but that effort also resulted in the Hawaii Supreme Court case that made it clear that you can't downzone land by a popular vote, right?

A: Yes, and, you know, I wasn't part of the Save Sandy Beach movement; I wasn't living here at the time. But it was many of those key people — in fact, one particular gentleman by the name of Dave Matthews — who mentored me.

In 2004, the cabins weren't an issue. ... but it was then that I first recognized a community need ... and stepped out to make my first initiative on behalf of my local farmer, to help my local farmer.

Q: You're talking about the farmers in Kamilo Nui Valley?

A: That's correct. ... But I didn't know which way was up, I didn't know what a neighborhood board was. You know, my life was very different. So where do I go? Where do I get my answers? I reached out to the Sierra Club, and the Sierra Club gentleman, Jeff Mikulina, recommended that I speak with a Mr. Dave Matthews, who lived in my area.

So I cold-called this gentleman and the man changed my life forever. (Laughs) ... We were on the phone about an hour and a half. That led to a series of meetings at Zippy's, that led to grassroots organizing, ... which led to my very first banner that I put up on April 22, ... which had the question, "What makes Hawaii Kai livable?" and an email address.

And people just started writing in to me about what makes it livable — or complaining. It was so apparent within about two months that there was such a hunger and need for community organizing, and possibly improving the venues that we do have for this sort of work.

Q: What was going on with the farmers in Kamilo Nui Valley?

A: There was a strategic divide-and-conquer occurring in the valley between certain entities that were eyeing it, and it would have fallen prey to urban encroachment well before its time. ... That's because, from a city planning standpoint, that valley was well protected — and is still well protected — because of an urban growth boundary. But when you have a community that doesn't understand what an urban growth boundary is, or you have potential business people who ignore that and pursue what they choose to pursue, you get these conflict situations.

Q: How did it turn out in the end?

A: The issue then was to assure the farmers that they had groundswell support from community, ... to connect community to each and every farmer and stay close to the farmers because there was this divide-and-conquer strategy and money being thrown to the farmers. ...

So here we are — fast forward — the farmers, with the help and support of community, organized and fended off urban encroachment. They set themselves up for really good, fair lease negotiations with the landowner (Kamehameha Schools). ...

Currently ... we've got wonderful relationships with our elected officials, state and county agencies and landowners, and we are looking at rebranding Kamilo Nui Valley so that the community and landowners can be equally proud of the product that comes from there.

Q: Who else is a member of the Livable Hawaii Kai Hui?

A: We've been operating 11 years, fueled by community volunteers. ... There are nine board-of-director members, a handful of us from the start. ... And we recognize that we've got various jobs. One is to maintain the strength of the organization, the stability of it, so it can be turned over to future generations. So for every dollar we get, we make sure that it goes toward land care.

Q: Where does the hui get its dollars?

A: Private donations from community members. And we don't have any paid staff. We choose to put our dollars toward what is best for the land project and connecting people to it.

Q: Do you receive any grants?

A: We've received two grants. One was a \$500,000 [errata: should be \$5,000] "capacity-building" grant from Hawaii Community Foundation, in 2010, to help us with strategic planning, and then the next was a \$100,000 grant from a combination of Sierra Club, Hawaii Thousand Friends and Our Children's Earth, in 2011, and that \$100,000 was for our Keawawa Wetland project.

Q: By the condominium project that's going up near Costco?

A: Yes, where the wetlands and Hawea heiau are. We ended up purchasing that land to protect it.

Q: How much did it cost?

A: We paid \$650,000 for five acres.

Q: Wow, that's great.

A: It's a fabulous price. But primarily you have to understand that the land is going to have lots of restrictions. If you have a critically endangered bird living there (the 'alae 'ula), you get all that set of dictates. And of course you're responsible now to your Hawaiian ohana, if you will, and their needs and desires and rights to practice and care for the heiau. ... It's a big responsibility.

Q: How are you administering that?

A: We didn't have much money, so we went out and found an acquisition partner to help us with the purchase. But before we did that we also went ahead and got a conservation plan going for the area. Federally there's a fabulous organization called NRCS (Natural Resources Conservation Service). ... and we were fortunate to have them provide us with a conservation plan. ... Once we knew that we had a solid partner, to help us care for such a resource, we felt we had the capacity for ownership. That's when we went to the Trust for Public Land. ... The Trust helped us do the acquisition, of which we were really blessed because the state and city became our funding partners.

Q: Who actually has title to the land?

A: Livable Hawaii Kai Hui.

Q: Going back to the Ka Iwi Mauka property, how's that going to be managed, assuming it's successfully transferred to Livable Hawaii Kau Hui?

A: What we want to make sure is that the community always has a place at the table in the care of the coast. ...

There are two parcels. There's one that is known as Queen's Rise, and that one is very visible from the Ka Iwi coast, adjacent, kind of, to the Makapuu trail, across the road. The other is nestled back behind the golf driving range, within the Kalama Valley side. ... So what's going to happen as we see it, and as we've put it forth in our application for funding, is the Queen's Rise has a vast amount of archaeological areas of interest. We've had many archaeologists up there, and Hawaiian cultural specialists and kupuna, and we feel our mandate is to do what we call a total cultural plan for that parcel. ... We're also working with the Waimanalo community on this project.

Q: What do you think about the proposal by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to include Maunalua Bay in its whale sanctuary?

A: You know, I don't know enough about it. Our organization has predominantly been land-based, but we have fought the fight to protect and increase public access rights to the ocean and the beach (like at Portlock Point).

Q: So you're not really involved?

A: I've attended a couple of briefing sessions. Our organization is really big on the process, on how you arrive is just as important as the end result. Community engagement is vitally important, but it appears as if right now there's something broken in the community-engagement process.

Q: I saw you have an advertising and marketing background and that you've consulted with residential developers and such, and thought it was an interesting path you've taken since then.

A: That's correct. Obviously I'm very comfortable with landowners. They have rights. Developers, they have rights. I'd like to see them all succeed, and I've been fortunate to work on a number of residential developments that have helped people in Hawaii afford the American Dream of homeownership. I've been fortunate and blessed to have made a living in the areas that I worked. And I think it's prepared me for what I'm doing now.