

Echelon Hawaii's Red Pencil Project supports third graders

The year-long lesson on community teaches third graders skills they can practice for life.

Lisa Yamada-Son remembers how her dad would gently push her to volunteer with The Salvation Army. But she had a full-time job in construction and little kids at home, and felt as though her schedule was packed enough. He kept trying anyway—he volunteered for 30 years—and mentioned [Echelon](#), The Salvation Army's emerging professionals arm.



It was where Yamada-Son met Tatianna Mulitauaopele when she finally agreed to go check things out two years ago.

“I knew that once I committed to it, I would be all in,” Yamada-Son said. “Tatianna and I are similar in that way.”

Mulitauaopele began volunteering in 2018 and also works full-time in construction, but said that she was looking for more ways to get involved [beyond the holidays](#).

So, as part of Echelon Hawaii, Mulitauaopele and Yamada-Son set out to do just that. They're part of the [Red Pencil Project](#), an Echelon initiative that supports third graders at two underserved schools in Honolulu, with about 100 students in all.

“It's important for these students to know that there are grown ups that care about them and want to pour into them,” Mulitauaopele said. “You know the old saying, ‘It takes a village to raise a child?’ This program is a great example of that.”



Courtesy Lisa Yamada-Son.

The Red Pencil Project started about a decade ago as a simple fundraiser, but has since grown into a year-long program with four distinct hands-on activities that center around four core values: generosity, kindness, compassion and service.

Yamada-Son and Mulitauaopele aim to ensure that each hour-long visit makes a lasting impact for an age group that's just learning about what it means to be a part of a community.

"They're shy in the beginning, but eventually, they get to know us, we get to know them, and they open up their little personalities," Yamada-Son said. "Then they see us and say, 'Hi, Miss Tati! Hi, Miss Lisa!' and we can see how excited they are for the lesson."

The first visit, generosity, is expressed in backpacks stuffed with donated school supplies and a \$100 gift card for each classroom. The second visit focuses on kindness and takes place before Thanksgiving. The students are given a "Be Kind" book in partnership with Read to Me International, which is read aloud, and are asked to color placemats for The Salvation Army's annual dinner.

"We'll ask them questions about how they want others to feel on this holiday, which encourages them to think outside of themselves," Mulitauaopele said. "At the same time, it was such a highlight to be able to give them a book to take home, since these kids don't often have their own."

The third lesson, compassion, starts with handing out motivational bracelets for each student as quiet reminders that they're brave and kind. Then they're asked to build kits that exemplify putting themselves in someone else's shoes—Yamada-Son actually leads the lesson by taking hers off.

The "kits" are filled with toiletries donated by a local hotel, finished with hand-drawn notes, and then sent to The Salvation Army's [Adult Rehabilitation Centers](#).

"The kids always know where their work is going," Mulitauaopele said. "They're part of the circle that uplifts the community."



Courtesy Lisa Yamada-Son.

The fourth lesson, service, helps clean up their campuses. And to cap off the Red Pencil Project, the fifth and final visit gives a “you make a difference pin” to each student, while one in particular receives the “Doing the Most Good” award alongside a \$50 gift card and a scholarship to [summer camp](#) at [Camp Homelani](#), The Salvation Army’s camp on Oahu’s North Shore.

“Our ultimate goal with Red Pencil is to be able to direct kids to attend Camp Homelani, because this is where we believe kids will experience a truly life-changing, transformational experience,” said Yamada-Son.

Throughout the year, the Echelon members monitor participants’ character and involvement with the Red Pencil Project.

“At the end of every visit, we remind them to look out for who is being the most generous, the kindest, and so on,” Mulitauaopele said. “It’s a reminder to keep these skills up after each visit, but then it plays into that final day.”

Yamada-Son agrees, adding, “The teachers will invite parents and read a letter for why one student was chosen, and because they’re practicing these lessons, the kids are so happy for that one student. It’s really neat to see.”

Mulitauaopele and Yamada-Son are looking forward to what will come this school year. They’re committed, just as they expected they would be.

“Our dream is to expand the program into either more grades or more schools,” Yamada-Son said. “Right now, we’re limited in our manpower, and I have to remember that it’s not about the quantity—it’s about the quality. It really feels like we’re making a difference for these kids.”

Do Good:

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