

From Battlefields to Boardrooms: My Kuleana to Ka‘ū and the Rise of a Native Hawaiian Organization (NHO)

By CAPT Mel Yokoyama, USN (retired), NHO Founder and Chairman, Mālama Ka‘ū Foundation



*Scene from Apple TV's **Chief of War**, depicting Chief Keōua's warriors standing resolute in Ka‘ū — the same ‘āina that continues to shape leaders today. The Mālama Ka‘ū Foundation carries forward that spirit of endurance through Native Hawaiian economic self-determination. (Image courtesy of Apple TV+ / Chief of War)*

In *Chief of War*, there's a moment that stays with me: Chief Keōua, standing tall in Ka‘ū's howling wind. That wind — fierce and unrelenting — still blows across our ‘āina today. It reminds me of the people of Ka‘ū: grounded, stubbornly hopeful, and unwilling to give up.

I was raised in **Pāhala**, a rural sugar plantation village in the Ka‘u district on the Big Island. Immediately after graduating Ka‘u High School, I enlisted in the Navy in 1988 and was privileged to serve on active duty for 28 years, eventually becoming a Naval Officer and retiring as a Navy Captain (O-6) on September 1st, 2020.

After a couple years working in industry, I made the decision to do something different and not work for money. Like most veterans, I struggled to find a meaningful purpose after decades of military service. Working to put more money in my pocket didn't cut it.

Supporting and giving back to my hometown and to the elders (“kupunas”) who shaped me has always been a dream. That dream became my new mission and purpose and I eventually established the **Mālama Ka‘ū Foundation**, a 501(c)3 nonprofit **Native Hawaiian Organization (NHO)**. <https://malamakau.org/>

As codified in our NHO by-laws, the Malama Ka‘u Foundation’s **board of directors** is (and always will be) **Native Hawaiians** certified through the Office of Hawaiian Affairs’ (OHA) Hawaiian Registry Program (HRP). The HRP is responsible for verifying Native Hawaiian ancestry through biological lineage, and issues official Hawaiian Registry Cards once ancestry is confirmed. This ensures our NHO remains authentically Native Hawaiian — by lineage, by tradition, and by purpose.



What’s the definition of a “Native Hawaiian?”

According to **13 CFR § 124.3**, for the **SBA 8(a) program**, a “Native Hawaiian” is defined as any individual whose ancestors were natives, **prior to 1778**, of the area which now comprises the State of Hawaii. This definition centers on lineage rather than a specific blood quantum percentage for individual eligibility within a Native Hawaiian Organization (NHO).

Click [here](#) to learn more about OHA’s Hawaiian Registry Program.

What is an NHO?

Pursuant to **13 CFR § 124.3**, an NHO is defined as: “any **community** service organization serving Native Hawaiians in the State of Hawaii which is a non-profit organization chartered by the State of Hawaii, is **controlled by Native Hawaiians**, and whose business activities will principally benefit such Native Hawaiians.”

Why NHOs Matter

A Native Hawaiian Organization (NHO) is a **community-based** nonprofit that owns one or more for-profit subsidiary companies. Through the **U.S. Small Business Administration’s 8(a) Business Development Program**, these NHO-owned companies are eligible to receive **sole-source Department of Defense (DoD) contracts up to \$100 million**, allowing NHO-owned

companies to deliver critical services for the U.S. government while reinvesting profits into the **local community** that the NHO supports.

Unlike ordinary businesses, NHO-owned 8(a) companies **must** show that their earnings flow back to Native Hawaiians — funding education, training, housing, and cultural preservation. Every contract awarded is more than a business win; it is a reaffirmation that **economic sovereignty is possible when we lead with aloha ‘āina and kuleana.**

“Senator Inouye armed us for a new kind of battle — not with weapons, but with opportunity. The NHO program gives Native Hawaiians the means to shape our own economic future.” – Mel Yokoyama, Founder and Chairman, Malama Ka’u Foundation



On April 21, 1945, near Colle Musatello, Italy, U.S. Army 2nd Lieutenant Daniel Inouye of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, led an assault against fortified German positions. When his platoon was pinned down, he pressed forward alone despite multiple wounds, destroying enemy strongpoints. He fought on after losing his right arm, refusing evacuation to ensure mission success - risking his life beyond duty to protect his men.

Senator Daniel Inouye received the **Medal of Honor** from President Bill Clinton on June 21, 2000.

Senator Inouye’s Gift to Hawai‘i

The intent of the NHO program is to provide Native Hawaiians with the ability to develop self-sufficient economic ventures that support their Native **communities**.

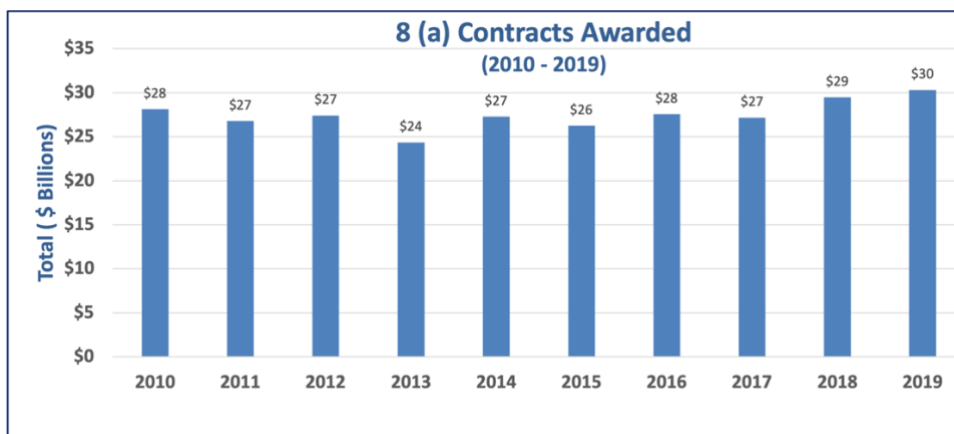
Our late Senator Daniel K. Inouye understood that true self-determination depends on economic strength. In 1988, he led passage of [Public Law 100-656](#), adding *Native Hawaiian Organizations* (NHO) to the SBA 8(a) Program. The law defined NHOs as nonprofit, **Native-controlled** entities that serve and benefit Hawaiians.

In the **early 2000s**, Senator Inouye advanced this vision further. Through his role on the Senate Appropriations Defense Subcommittee, he secured Department of Defense (DoD) contracting preferences for NHOs equivalent to those enjoyed by Alaska Native Corporations (ANCs) and

Tribes. The FY2004-2005 Defense Appropriations Acts and subsequent [DFARS 219.805-1](#) implementation allowed **DoD sole-source awards to NHO-owned 8(a) firms up to \$100 million without justification and approval.**

He envisioned NHOs as engines of self-sufficiency — organizations that would create high-skill jobs, build local expertise, and reinvest wealth here at home...in the State of Hawaii. This was his way of preparing the next generation of Native Hawaiians for a new era of competition — **one fought in boardrooms, not battlefields.**

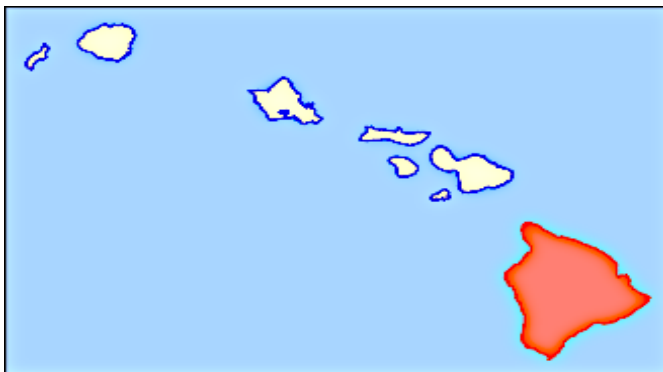
Because of Senator Inouye’s work, NHO-owned 8(a) companies have received lucrative sole-source contract from the Department of Defense (DoD) and federal civilian agencies worldwide; however, we must ensure the profits generated **come back to Hawaii** to uplift our own.



Source: **Congressional Research Service (CRS) R44844,**

The Ka’u Community

We established Malama Ka’u Foundation because we love Ka’u — its people, its land, and the generations of Native Hawaiians who deserve better than what modern society has offered them. This is not a business strategy. It is a promise. And we want you to understand exactly why we made it.



Ka'u, on the southeastern corner of Hawai'i's Big Island, has spent decades absorbing the consequences of a simple economic truth: when money and material wealth are the only metrics that matter, rural communities like ours will always lose. When the sugar cane industry departed in the late 1990s for cheaper labor elsewhere, the people of Ka'u were never part of the calculation. Today, approximately **90% of Ka'u High School students are classified as totally economically disadvantaged**. Native Hawaiians statewide carry the highest rates of poverty and unemployment of any major ethnic groups in the state of Hawaii.

These are not accidents. They are the downstream result of decisions made by institutions that measured success in dollars — and nothing else.

The People of Ka'u

To understand why our NHO exists, you must first understand who the people of Ka'u are. Long before sugar cane arrived in the 1800's, Ka'u was known throughout the Hawaiian Islands for something else entirely: **its warriors**. Historically, Ka'u carried the highest concentration of Native Hawaiian warriors in the islands. They were fierce protectors of their land — not merely against outside kingdoms and foreign powers, but against anyone who sought to exploit or compromise the values of this isolated district. That warrior spirit was not merely military. It was a deep, principled refusal to surrender Ka'u's identity, land, or way of life to forces that did not respect them.

That warrior culture did not disappear. It adapted. When the sugar plantations arrived, the people of Ka'u brought those same qualities — discipline, hard work, teamwork, and pride of ownership — to the cane fields. For nearly a century, Ka'u families labored side by side, building something together with their hands. They became exceptionally skilled at physical work — agricultural and manufacturing labor that demanded precision, endurance, and craftsmanship. These are not lost skills. They are inherited strengths, passed from generation to generation, and they remain among Ka'u's greatest assets today.

Our Commitment to the People of Ka'u

To the people of Ka'u: this foundation exists because of you, for you, and will always be accountable to you.

Codified in Mālama Ka'ū Foundation's nonprofit by-laws, our purpose is clear: 100% of the NHO's net earnings, generated through our SBA 8(a) subsidiaries flow directly back to the **Ka'u community**. This structure ensures our NHO's mission cannot be overridden by any outside investors' or short-term financial returns.

We see DoD and Federal Agency' contracting not as an end, but as a **means to empower our next generation of Native Hawaiians** — training future SBA 8(a) CEOs, healthcare

professionals, and tech-startup entrepreneurs who will carry this work forward. Every contract we're awarded is an investment in our next generation, starting with the people of Ka'u.

The goal is not just jobs — it is the freedom to live and work in the rural community they love, without having to choose between opportunity and home.

But this movement cannot rest on one NHO alone. Hawai'i needs more nonprofit NHOs — more SBA 8(a) for-profit companies — **owned, controlled, and led by local residents that were born and raised in Hawaii.** They best understand the economic hardships and cultural erosion across our island' communities.

When Native Hawaiians lead, we ensure that the profits generated by federal contracting stay in Hawaii, strengthening our families and local communities.

Our NHO's Three Lines of Effort

The first is **Native Hawaiian Culture and Identity** — because language, history, and the knowledge of who you are is not a program add-on. It is the prerequisite for everything else.

The second is **Workforce Development** — for too long, building a career meant leaving Ka'u. Our youth have been forced to choose between opportunity and home. That ends here. We build on Ka'u's legacy of skilled labor while expanding pathways into agriculture, construction, cybersecurity, healthcare, AI, and autonomous systems. The goal isn't just jobs—it's the freedom to live and work in Ka'u, and the ability to return home stronger.

The third is **Community Resilience** — and it is perhaps the most important of all. Ka'u is a remote, deeply rooted community that has watched outside corporations' extract value from its land, its coastline, and its natural beauty — and leave little behind. True resilience means Ka'u is never again placed in the position of having to compromise its values, its culture, or its people simply to survive. It means building enough local capability, local leadership, and local economic strength that the community can say no when outside interests do not align with its own.

Call to Action: Our Shared Kuleana

Our kūpuna once defended this 'āina with spears and courage. Today, we defend it with knowledge, discipline, and unity. The next generation of Hawaiian leaders must rise — not to fight battles, but to build industries, create local jobs, and guide Hawaii's economy with values rooted in aloha and pono.

To Native Hawaiians who grew up in Hawai'i and are working to establish an NHO without the resources, connections, or mentors to show them the way: we built this foundation with you in mind. The path is not easy, and it should not have to be walked alone. **Malama Ka'u Foundation is committed to mentoring the next generation of Native Hawaiian-led organizations** — sharing what we have learned, opening doors where we can, and making sure that a lack of resources is never the reason a good mission fails to launch.

Additionally...**start your own SBA 8(a) for-profit company and become a CEO.** Bring your island community together and create something that lasts beyond your lifetime. The path exists because our kūpuna — and Senator Inouye — made sure it would.

Economic self-determination is not about contracts or profit; it's about control — over our destiny, our resources, and our children's future. The winds of Ka'u still blow, urging us forward. Together, let us rise with them. Imua!

Me ke aloha,

Mel Yokoyama

About the Author



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Raised in Pāhala — a small, wind-swept town in the Ka'u district on Hawai'i Island — **Mel Yokoyama** built his path from humble beginnings to the highest levels of Navy leadership. A retired US Navy Captain, he served 28 years on active duty, commanding both a Naval Aviation squadron and the Navy's largest Information Warfare Center on the West Coast. After retirement, Mel didn't inherit an NHO or 8(a) business — he built both from scratch. Drawing on his operational and acquisition experience, he founded the [Malama Ka'u Foundation](#) and its flagship 8(a) for-profit company, [Akamai Intelligence LLC](#), creating a platform to compete head-to-head with larger companies while channeling profits back to Hawaii. His journey reflects the values of Ka'u — resilience, service, and relentless drive — turning military discipline into entrepreneurial impact. Want to learn more: Click [here](#).