

MICHELLE LAZUKA: KUMU O NĀ KEIKI



Michelle and her niece Harper



Michelle and one of her students.



By Jasmine Hanner

Photos courtesy of Wendy Ardolino of Maui Island Photo and Michelle Lazuka

Loss, heartbreak, and traumas can seem crushing while they're happening, and even many years later. However, these experiences don't have to leave us empty or full of pain; instead, they can shape our lives and direct our paths to a brighter future. One way Michelle Lazuka has turned one tragedy into something positive is by honoring her father and trying to follow in his admirable footsteps. In many ways, this has made her the successful person and teacher she is today. "I was held back in first grade," she explains. "My father had passed away suddenly when I was six. At the time I didn't understand. I was terrified to go to school: I couldn't read, was embarrassed around my classmates, cried a lot, and got sent home often. I missed so

much school, I had to repeat the grade. Later, I learned that children cannot learn if they are anxious, and I wished my teachers had been more empathetic and nurturing. My experience made me strive to be the teacher I wish I'd had."

Michelle's father, Michael Lazuka, was a generous man, putting others first and always smiling and making people laugh. "One day, he passed a trailer park where he noticed several young children outside playing soccer in the cold with bare feet. He immediately found the nearest store and purchased shoes for all the children, then delivered them and made conversation with the kids. He displayed compassion and kindness like this every day and even extended his service to Guatemala,

doing charity work for families in desperate need of food and shelter. Even on the day he passed away, he gave back by being an organ donor. He was the best role model, and for that, I am forever grateful. He was taken from this earth at only 35 years old with three children. By recognizing his loving spirit, and life of service, I hope to keep his memory alive. It's also important for me to mention the influence he's had on how I've chosen to live my life: to give back to others. The memories and legacy he left behind are by far my most cherished childhood memories."

Michelle says it's hard to go through life events without him. However, she still looks to her father for guidance and reassurance. "The love he had for Hawai'i is a big reason why I live here and feel more at home. It gives me peace to think he is still living here in spirit."

Today, Michelle lives at Kalama View in Kihei with her best friend and husband, Alex, where they enjoy being able to walk to beaches and restaurants. "I met Alex when we were living at the same apartment complex 18 years ago. I had a crush on him." When Michelle talks about Alex, her face lights up. "Throughout the years we have faced a significant amount of life hurdles together, which I believe is why we



Michelle and one of her students.

"Thanks, Michelle, for having a hand in shaping my children's future, I am appreciative of you teaching them, but it's really the compassion and grace that has had me coming back to you, that is not something you can learn from a book. They learned that by it being modeled. So thankful for your impact on our family. I see little bits of Miss Michelle in my kids every day." -Jemie

have grown so close. Alex has always supported my education and career. The best part of my day is when he comes home from work. I love and

appreciate him more and more every day," she admits, somehow beaming even brighter. "Alex grew up in North Carolina and graduated with a bachelor's degree from North Carolina State University in Business Management and a Master of Accountancy from UNC-Wilmington. He is the controller at Elcco, Inc., an electrical construction company, and a volunteer and treasurer for the Maui Ocean Center Marine Institute, which rescues and rehabilitates sick and injured sea turtles."

Being a teacher and "mom of many" is something Michelle says she's always wanted. While she and Alex don't have children of their own, they

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Michelle and her students.

do have six nieces, and Michelle’s worked professionally with children in every job she’s held. “I believe working so close with many children has filled that void,” she says, smiling like any proud mama. “I even have families in my neighborhood that walk over and attend MT. I get to walk students home after the lesson. I love it. Plus, I have five cats! Four are rescues. Walter, our most recent, is a Maine coon.” At six months old, Walter is already incredibly fluffy, with the typical bushy tail and pointed ears of a Maine coon. (He won’t be fully grown for four years when he’ll be about three feet long and a foot tall.)

“My oldest was struggling with his reading and was behind in first grade. They wanted to hold him back, now, he’s ready for 2nd grade! Thank you, Mrs. Michelle, for taking such great care of my boys and making sure they are on track. The progress they both have made with you has been astronomical. You’re a rockstar.”
-Kristina

As many of us know, time spent with keiki is a truly rewarding experience that will light up your life. It can also be exhausting when you’re teaching and creating specialized lessons each day! “Honestly, after a long week of teaching, I love to spend a day at home,” Michelle says, acknowledging that teachers are human like the rest of us. “I enjoy cuddling up with my cats, my computer, and books on education. ...and spending time with Alex and doing anything on the water. I love to continue to learn and believe it’s a big part of being a successful teacher. I belong to several teacher groups and book clubs, and I’m always adding to my teaching toolbox. Collecting and reading children’s books is something I love to do as well. I hope to write my own children’s book someday.”

Michelle was born and raised in Cleveland, Ohio, where she graduated from Ohio University. She moved to Charlotte, North Carolina, where she interned as a child life specialist, volunteered as a wish granter for Make a Wish foundation, completed her yoga certification, ran a successful children’s yoga program called Yogi Friends, and began her teaching career. After she began teaching on Maui, she quickly decided to take her own education to the next level. She moved to O’ahu and attended the Chaminade University of Honolulu, earning her Montessori teaching credential along with a Master of Education and graduating summa cum laude. Later, she undertook the challenge of opening a preschool in Kihei, focused on providing a higher level of early childhood education. “It was a big accomplishment and something I worked extremely hard to create. I wanted a safe and nurturing environment for children to develop a lifelong love for learning. It was a dream come true. I was thrilled with the program.” Then Covid happened. “We had to close our doors... I was shocked and heartbroken. I felt awful for all the children and families. I knew immediately that face-to-face learning was something I could provide and something the community needed.”

The pandemic’s silver lining led to her best career move yet, Michelle says: the founding of Maui Tutoring and Educational Services (MT). “Given the circumstances, I knew children were going to need help. In March 2020, I decided to tutor full-time. Alex helped me make a special



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classroom, library, and outdoor play and garden area for the children.” What started as basic tutoring evolved into multiple educational services ranging from personalized curriculum kits to a complete, individualized curriculum and thorough academic evaluations. “I cover all state standards and work with special needs, gifted, and speech-delayed children preschool through grade 4,” Michelle lists off her specialties. “At MT, each child is given their own curriculum that tailors to them. It’s extremely specialized, so the children learn efficiently and, in a fun, engaging manner. They gain confidence and a love for learning. Honestly, I had no idea how much this was needed – I am full six days a week. Through tutoring, I’ve been able to help even more families than I did in a traditional classroom. Students that were described as behind, disruptive, non-verbal, etc., have been coming to MT and are now ahead academically!” Working on her own and instilling her own values and professional knowledge in her business has also been something Michelle appreciates and loves. She uses Montessori methods, but not for every child; she says she uses several different philosophies and curriculums she’s studied throughout her education. “All children learn differently, so pulling lessons that are appropriate for each child’s academic needs is critical.”

“Education is extremely important to me,” Michelle says seriously. “Something upsetting I have seen are rash judgments of students’ behaviors and aptitudes due to the lack of time and resources in the school system to properly assess them. I was appalled to see several students come to me with the improper diagnosis. Some students were even told they needed to be held back and after a visit with me, I saw that not to be the case whatsoever. This is detrimental to the development and needs of the child. Education was a challenge on Maui even before the pandemic, but

I’ve found a way to provide keiki with specific needs that they couldn’t get in the school system.” Early intervention is key, and Michelle believes all children should be given a chance to thrive and reach their potential. MT has made a tremendous impact and difference in the lives of many children here on Maui.

“As a country, we should be devoting more resources to education, particularly early childhood education,” she says firmly. “There is no reason why we cannot provide schools with the budgets to pay teachers what they are worth, provide the necessary resources, and make sure children are given as much opportunity as possible in a safe environment. Studies have shown a correlation between investment in early childhood education and improved outcomes in education, health, and economic conditions... Watching and helping children grow and learn rapidly has been the highlight of my life! Absolutely. Education is something you will have forever; nobody can take it away from you. My hope is to instill the priceless value of education in children from a very early age to set them up for future academic success. I want to be an individual in their life that they can always come back to and count on. I do stay true to that.”

You can connect with Michelle by following her on Facebook and Instagram (@MauiTutoring) or by visiting her website, MauiTutoring.com. For her photoshoot, Michelle is wearing a handcrafted lei by Kula Rose and had her hair done by Lia at Aloha Hair Studio. ✨

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