



Photo by Thomas Duffy

style combines with heartfelt community involvement in KORE's revered beach-bound mission that enables special needs individuals to catch a wave. What began and thrives as a non-profit grassroots organization, KORE (Kaua'i Ocean Recreation Experience) inspires its participants and volunteers both in and out of the water. "Everyday miracles happen at KORE. All the tears...the smiles...it's hard to explain. It is something so empowering – every beach day is a pinnacle experience," expresses founder and Hanalei Fire Captain, Kurt Leong. Initially launched on August 15, 2009, KORE's beach days have become hip and uplifting gatherings. Occurring once a month at Black Pot Beach Park in the scenic landscape of Hanalei Bay, an average day draws 150-200 volunteers and participants. Besides the delicious grinds and jamming local musicians, KORE's philosophy is simple: taking special needs people and their families into the ocean to enjoy a day at the beach. Whether the participants are ushered atop a wave with a trained surf instructor, floating calmly in the water with a physical therapist, or simply walking in the sand, the beach days prove to be a meaningful experience. "It's magical – you're blown away by it. It's the most concentrated feeling of love and aloha that brings together all walks of life. KORE puts everything in perspective and I'm grateful to be a part of it," describes Thom Kilroy, longtime volunteer surf instructor. Built on a foundation of firemen, lifeguards, doctors and nurses, safety is at the forefront of KORE's operation. Fully stocked with medical equipment, the beach day setup begins at 8:30 a.m. and kicks off with a group pule (prayer) followed by a five to ten minute safety briefing. Then, the surf instructors are each paired with a participant – a very intentional process facilitated by Kurt Leong and his right-hand man, Bruce Cosbey. The participants, both children and adults, come from a variety of backgrounds including autism, cerebral palsy, limb amputations and even heart attack and cancer patients. Depending on how many arrive (the average is 25-40), the participants get at least a 30 minute chunk of time in the water.

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Photo by Kurt Leong

Despite KORE's flourishing success, the first beach day was a very different affair, with busted up surf boards, duct tape adorned life jackets and plywood instead of beach mats for wheelchairs. In its infancy, KORE was born from the bottom up with no funding – a true grassroots effort from Leong and other key supporters like Tom Tannery with the YMCA and physical therapist Suzie Woolway. Leong, a devoted surfer, yearned to give back, had no interest in profitable gains. After getting special needs participants riding waves at a huge Access Surf event on O'ahu, Leong was committed to bring it back home to Kaua'i.

"When I first started, I never imagined we would be where we are now, over 60 beach days later. It has changed me so much. The people of KORE are so giving. It's not about any of us...it's about all of us."

Relying on volunteers to thrive,

Leong's personal devotion to the organization is unmistakable, since he maintains ninety percent of the equipment and molds the beach days around his schedule. And don't let the KORE crowds fool you – volunteers are still needed. Children, families, musicians and trained professionals, notably qualified water men and women, all have something to offer. There is a place for everyone.

As the hardworking, hero-like surf instructors assist participants on surfboards alongside their fellow water safety personnel, the food is cooking and the music is blazing. The Iron Maiden Waffles are a favorite (whipped cream included) together with a diversity of other fare, like vegetarian dishes, meats, salads and more. Wrapping the day up around 1:00 p.m., everyone seems to leave the beach day with a sense of pride.

KORE has aided Wounded

Warriors, the Make-A-Wish Foundation (with Bethany Hamilton), and even succeeded in getting a 65 year old Catholic nun from New York City diagnosed with cancer coasting on a wave. Some participants travel to Kaua'i on a special mission just to have this ocean experience.

In addition to the loyal volunteers, 'ohana and sponsors like the Kaua'i Lifeguard Association, the YMCA, Duke's, Tamba Surf Company, Kayak Hanalei, Dakine and others, make KORE possible.

"We make everybody feel welcome. I want KORE to continue to be as positive as possible – it creates the atmosphere of our beach days. Come even if you don't surf. As long as you're on that beach, you're showing people you care about them," Leong explains.

Visit korekauai.com to show your support. ■