

## Creative Works

### Kū Kanaka: Stand Tall

#### A Conversation with Filmmaker Marlene Booth

(with RDS Multimedia and Creative Works Editor, Raphael Raphael)

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**Abstract:** In this short interview, filmmaker and educator Marlene Booth discusses her work on the documentary *Kū Kanaka: Stand Tall* about the life of disabled Native Hawaiian activist Kanalu Young. She also discusses her friendship with Young as well as her own creative practice.

**RR: What initially inspired you to create *Kū Kanaka: Stand Tall*?**

MB: I had worked with Kanalu Young on an earlier film, *Pidgin the Voice of Hawai‘i*. As we were finishing that film, Kanalu passed away. I found myself thinking about Kanalu and how he became the man he was. Eventually, I decided that I wanted to make a film about him.

**RR: Can you say a bit about your personal experience knowing and working with Kanalu before creating a film about him?**

MB: I first met Kanalu in 2000 when we both served on a panel judging film proposals for possible funding. Our reactions to potential projects were quite similar, and I approached Kanalu after the panel asking if he would consider working together on a documentary film. Without a second’s hesitation, he said, “yes!”

It took us a while to find a topic and to establish a rhythm in our work – he was teaching full time at the University of Hawai‘i – I was new to Hawai‘i and working as an independent filmmaker. Initially we thought we would make a film about the rebirth of the Hawaiian language. After we did a considerable amount of research on that topic, Kanalu, who loved the Hawaiian language, changed his mind. He felt strongly that we should produce a film about Pidgin English in Hawai‘i, a topic I knew little about. When I asked him why he wanted to change the focus of our film from Hawaiian to Pidgin, this very proud Hawaiian man answered, “Without Pidgin, I would cease to be whole.”

The power of that response struck me, and in fact, we changed the subject of our film to focus on language and identity in Hawai‘i. *Pidgin: The Voice of Hawai‘i* became in many ways Kanalu’s loving homage to the fusion language of Hawai‘i’s working people including Kanalu’s father, George, and many members of his extended family.

Working with Kanalu was wonderful and challenging. Kanalu’s physical condition was always changing. Though we had hoped that he would be able to conduct interviews for the film, he was unable to go on location. He had developed pressure sores and needed to spend

his non-teaching time in bed healing. He held court – and office hours for his students – in his bedroom, and I would meet him there to talk about the film, about Hawaiian history, and about language and identity. He insisted that I sit in on his course, “Hawai‘i: Center of the Pacific,” so I could learn the basics of Hawaiian history and culture. Later, he encouraged me to sit in on his seminar about Hawaiian institutions.

We became friends through his teaching me about Hawai‘i, both formally in his classes and informally as we talked story in his bedroom office.

As Noelani Goodyear-Kā‘opua says in the film, “He saw himself as a student and a teacher at the same time.” He was always learning and teaching.

**RR: I would like to ask you a bit about the journey of creating this film:**

**RR: How long did it take to bring the film from concept to completion?**

MB: It took about four years to bring the film from concept to completion.

**RR: What were some of the main challenges in bringing it to life?**

MB: There were two main challenges in bringing *Kū Kanaka: Stand Tall* to life, and they were in some ways related. The first challenge was finding the funds to make the film. I wrote several grant proposals applying for funding, and I didn’t always succeed the first time around. When I was rejected, it often seemed as though readers of my proposals could not ‘see’ the film I envisioned, and, frankly, it took me a while to see and write persuasively about the film I wanted to make.

The other big challenge was my finding my way through an abundance of materials – interviews with Kanalu, still photos, writings, recollections of family, friends, colleagues, teachers, creative writings – to find a story that felt true to Kanalu. In this journey, Kanalu’s great friend and colleague, Jon Osorio, was a huge help. He knew Kanalu well and he knew Hawaiian history well, and he was able to see – and to help me see – the connections in the life stories of both.

**RR: The portrait you present of Kanalu as a teacher, a learner and an activist is unlike anything viewers are likely to have ever seen. What would you like viewers to come away with as far as their deepened understanding of Kanalu’s life and his activism and the ways in which disability was part of that?**

MB: I’d like viewers to come away understanding that Kanalu’s activism defined his identity as a Native Hawaiian man with quadriplegia. In the early years following his diving accident, he became a leader in the beginnings of the wheelchair sports movement in Hawai‘i. He loved being part of a group of people whose lives looked like his – he was a beloved member of a large, extended family – and when the Hawaiian Movement grew, he found even more room for himself as a proud Native Hawaiian patriot with a disability. Being both disabled and

Native Hawaiian expanded his life, and he was grateful to see and live in the world through that expanded vision.

**RR: Turning to some of your creative choices in the film: In other dominant representations of disability in film, the accident that precipitates a person's disability is often presented very dramatically. For example, in *Me Before You* (2016), when the main character is hit by a motorcycle, the audience is treated to a loud screech, a wide shot of the motorcycle approaching the character, and a medium close-up of the character turning in slow-motion all in a span of a few seconds. *Kū Kanaka: Stand Tall* treats Kanalu's life-changing accident very differently: Kanalu's accident is connected to a shot of a boy diving into the ocean as a calm ukulele track is played in the background. The transition to the details about the aftermath of the accident is signaled by the fading out of the ukulele track and a low, yet soft boom noise. Can you share with readers a little bit about your creative choices here as the director of not presenting the moment of Kanalu's accident in a highly dramatic way?**

MB: In deciding to present Kanalu's diving accident the way I did, I was influenced by my friend Katharina Heyer, a wonderful professor of political science and disability studies who dissuaded me from putting Kanalu's accident front and center in the film. Kanalu's diving accident took place in the calm waters of the Pacific – in the same place we see the young divers in the film – and once he hit his head, it took his young friends a while to understand that he had been injured. The accident changed Kanalu's life forever, but he understood it as both a sudden, dramatic change and a change which took years to assimilate. In his own life, his disability was a fact because Kanalu's disability was visible; he didn't need to talk about it. For him, I think, his accident meant loss, acceptance, and assimilation to a new identity. His ability to assimilate newness, not just in identity but in ideas too, made him a person open to all kinds of people, ideas, and approaches to living. To have overdramatized his accident would have misrepresented who Kanalu was.

**RR: Were there any other aspects of his life that you set out to consciously present differently from how disability is frequently presented in film and media? (Perhaps including some things that are frequently overlooked or ignored and perhaps excluding others?)**

MB: Because Kanalu's disability was visible he did not need to talk about it. You knew upon seeing him that he was in a wheelchair. Seeing Kanalu physically made an impact. When he entered a room in his electric wheelchair, you heard him coming. Once you saw him, you saw him expertly maneuver his chair. If he was part of a presentation that called for the Hawaiian protocol of chanting, it was his voice that drew your attention. If you heard him lecture, you paid attention to his eloquence and speaking voice and to his wit. There was so much about Kanalu that was large and broad. Disability was one of those things.

If I'd known before he passed away that I would be making a film about him, I would have filmed him more with other people. He commanded a group, not by assuming control but because other people looked to him to lead. He was smart, kind, compassionate, funny,

stubborn, honest, and fair. Though he occasionally nodded off – don't we all? – to be in his presence was to be with someone alive on all burners. He was alert to other people, and he always listened in a way that let you know you had been heard.

**RR: Can you speak a bit to the ways in which Kanalu connected his own embodied experience with the native Hawaiian experience?**

MB: Kanalu felt that if he, a man in a wheelchair, could be an activist, so could anyone. I'm paraphrasing here, but he once spoke of language and history as weapons in a war for cultural survival. At the same time, he also spoke of the Hawaiian movement as being broken and in need of repair, and he compared himself to that. He felt he understood Hawaiian trauma in his being since both he and his nation had suffered trauma and emerged with an identity tempered but with resilience. As Jon Osorio says in the film, "the kind of trauma imposed on our people could be compared to the trauma of Kanalu's accident. You could say that it really changed the trajectory of where we were headed as a nation, as a people." Of course, Kanalu's accident changed his trajectory too, and he would have argued it was that change that made him who he was.

**RR: Thinking about your own larger practice as an artist and teacher (and perhaps your own mission(s) in your work), how do you place your film *Kū Kanaka: Stand Tall* within this?**

MB: I learned from Kanalu in making *Kū Kanaka: Stand Tall* that there are embodied languages, every bit as eloquent as those we speak. I like to tell stories. All my films in some way deal with language, identity, and stories of extraordinary people whom we may often overlook. *Kū Kanaka: Stand Tall* taught me through Kanalu's story, that identity is complex, multi-dimensional and, in the best case, expansive.

**RR: Is there anything else you would like to add about the film?**

MB: Kanalu was someone who, though he loved being on stage, did not like to call attention to his accomplishments. He drew a distinction between American rugged individualism and what he called Hawaiian rugged groupism. He loved that groupism and understood that not only his life but his sense of himself depended on it. Without his family, his students, and his Hawaiian community, he would not have been able to recover and move forward with confidence. He felt that his accomplishments--and they were many--came about not by his effort alone but by the constant embrace of those who knew he acted not for self-aggrandizement but for the betterment of all.

**RR: Any upcoming/current project(s) you are most excited about that you would like to mention?**

MB: At the moment I'm busy working on getting *Kū Kanaka: Stand Tall* into classrooms and other settings where people with stories similar to Kanalu's can use it. Within reason, I'm happy to go anywhere to speak about Kanalu and the film.

For institutions subscribing to Kanopy, *Kū Kanaka: Stand Tall* is available at the following link: <http://www.kanopy.com/product/stand-tall-ku-kanaka>

The DVD of *Kū Kanaka: Stand Tall* and streaming options are also available at New Day Films: <https://www.newday.com/film/k%C5%AB-kanakastand-tall>



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