

## *She Wore an Orange Lei*

We will call her Mary, although that is not her real name. She is a petite woman, perhaps in her 80s, with a classic Asian face. She reminds me of a delicate China doll. She is a resident in the Alzheimer's unit at Ka Punawai Ola, a facility operated by Life Care in Kapolei on the island of Oahu in Hawaii.

Don Giardina, Cathy Murray, my wife, Lola, and I met her last week on a visit to that building. As we walked through her area on a tour – meeting staff and greeting residents – Mary was a light that brightened the room. Her manner was warm and inviting, and her smile was cheerful. She was wearing a colorful dress, adorned with a lovely orange lei. I took her hand and said hello, and she returned an even broader smile.

“What a beautiful lei,” I told her, “and it looks so perfect on you.” It was given to her, I was told, for Mother's Day.

Glancing down at the lei, Mary caressed it for a moment. Then she started to remove it from around her neck. She wanted to give it to me. It was a special act of friendship for a total stranger she had just met.

“No,” I said. “It looks much better on you than it would on me.” I pulled the lei down to her shoulders, and moved away. Twice more, she lifted the lei, and an associate standing near her placed it back around her neck.

The moment was very touching. Through a clouded mind, from deep within her soul, an act of hospitality and accommodation bubbled up.

Mary is like that, according to Mercedes Foster, the quality services manager of the dedicated Alzheimer's unit. “She is a very personable human being, a very entertaining type of person. She likes to be sung to, and she gets other residents to sing with her. She wants to be invited to hula dances,” Foster said.

“She is generally kind-hearted. When other residents have their mood swings, they turn to her, for her to console them.”

In retrospect, I wish I had taken the lei. Very likely, because it was a gift to her, it was among her most valuable possessions. But she was willing to share it with someone else. It was a gracious act of giving, and I should have been gracious in the receiving.

And that is one of the important lessons of life.

--Beecher Hunter