

# Surfrider Spirit Sessions

By Rosalyn Young



At 13 years old local teen Kimo was arrested for dealing drugs, he was flunking classes and frequently ran away from home. Today he is a high school graduate with honors, enrolled in college, and has 2 jobs mentoring other youth to be the best they can be. What inspired the change in his direction in life? “I caught my first wave,” Kimo smiles.

Kimo is one of many teens who caught the stoke of surfing and transformed their lives, thanks a local non-profit surf organization, Surfrider Spirit Sessions. Now in its fifth year, Spirit Sessions uses surfing as a metaphor for life to help adjudicated and at-risk teens redirect their lives in positive directions. The teens are directed to the program by family court judges and probation officers where they are paired with a volunteer surf mentor who provides guidance in and out of the water. The combination of positive mentorship and counseling with healthy physical activity as well as environmental and cultural education is what makes this program incredibly unique.

As a mentor during last year’s summer session, I can attest to what a special experience Spirit Sessions gives all of its participants, mentors included. I learned as much from the girls in my group as I hope they did from me. Most of all, it was just plain fun – hanging out, surfing and talking about our lives, dreams and goals. Everyone, no matter who you are or where you come from, needs joy and a good friend to laugh with. One of my favorite moments last year involved Kimo, who now manages the Junior Mentor program. He watched me catch a wave only to wipe out seconds later in the clumsiest fashion. “Shake it off!” he laughed, “Let’s go again!” His drive is infectious, and truth be told, my surfing improved tremendously during the program.

Spirit Sessions was inspired by a book written by local surfer and ray of sunshine Cynthia Derosier entitled, *The Surfer Spirit*, which celebrates the soul and spirit of surfing. After teaching an art class for girls in the Hawaii Girls Court, Derosier was asked to teach the themes from her book which became the basis for the program. With the help of the Surfrider Foundation Oahu Chapter, Hawaii Girls Court, and Star Beach Boys, and proceeds from the sale of the book, the Surfrider Spirit Sessions was born. “There are approximately five thousand kids in the juvenile justice system in Hawaii and only sixty-five probation officers,” Derosier explains, “These kids are not getting the supervision they need. The kids we work with are not bad kids,” she says, “All of them have experienced some kind of trauma, abuse or neglect which leads to delinquent behaviors. They need support and an adrenaline outlet and surfing provides that.”

Deputy Chief Judge, Senior Hawaii Family Courts Judge, Mark Browning incorporated Spirit Sessions into the Juvenile Drug Court program and couldn’t be happier with the results. “Spirit Sessions has become an essential part of our mission to turn kids away from a life of drugs and crime and transform them into responsible citizens. To say this program is unique is a gross understatement. The fact is no other program in the State of Hawaii or in the entire United States incorporates the active mentorship that Spirit Sessions does. I make this statement based upon my fifteen years of Family Court judicial experience.”

“Spirit Sessions offers a supportive community that does not label the kids as ‘at-risk’ or ‘bad.’ “We call our kids ‘Champions in Training,’” Derosier says, “Because we’ve seen their passion and spirit, and we know they have survived some immense challenges. We see their potential and know what they can do. We focus on learning from past mistakes and moving forward.”

Each Saturday session of the eight week program begins with a talk circle where introductions take place and a theme for the day is presented. A yoga warm-up is followed by land instruction by waterman and Program Manager, “Uncle Santa Sam” Rodrigues. The teens then hit the water with their mentors for one-on-one



surf time. The group enjoys lunch and a journaling session after surfing. The kids are encouraged to contemplate the day's theme and apply what they have learned on the water to their lives. A cultural or marine biology lesson is also incorporated into the day, and the session ends with a malama aina, or beach cleanup.

"Most of our kids don't believe they can achieve anything substantial," Cynthia smiles, "But they also don't think they can surf at the beginning of our program and soon they are riding waves. After they catch that first wave we ask them 'What else can you do that you didn't believe you could, but we know you can do?' Giving back is one of the first places they start."

Despite Spirit Sessions' achievements and success, the reality of being a non-profit organization holds its challenges. "We are trying to survive financially, like everyone else," she says. "The State has no funds for us; we must rely on community support to stay afloat." The cost of incarcerating one teen in Hawaii is \$152,000 a year. Derosier says Spirit Sessions can serve one hundred kids, with better outcomes, for less than the cost of incarcerating four kids in jail for a year. Kimo and other youth are seeking support as they clean kuhio beach to save turtles and earn funds to keep the program running. Cigarette butts are the number one pollutant found on beaches and it takes only ten butts to kill a small sea turtle. (A fact that has encouraged many teens in the program to quit smoking.) Supporters are asked to make a pledge of one to two cents for every cigarette butt they pick up during this Butt Busters campaign. For more information about Spirit Sessions or to make a pledge to the Butt Busters Campaign, visit: [www.surferspirit.org](http://www.surferspirit.org)

Interested in becoming a Spirit Session mentor? Contact Program Manager Sam Rodrigues, (808) 721-5662 [sam@surferspirit.org](mailto:sam@surferspirit.org)



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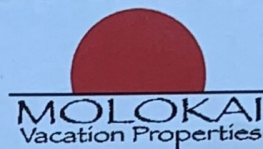
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