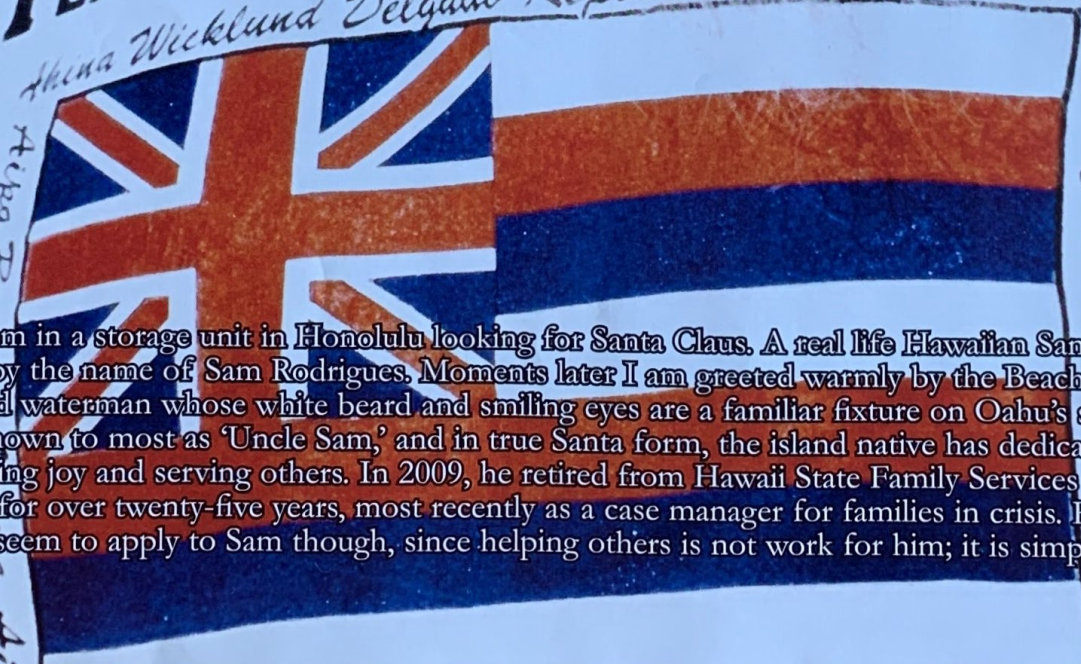


Uncle Santa Sam Shares the Gift of Surf

By Rosalyn Young
Photos Courtesy Rodrigues Ohana

YEAR OF THE HAWAIIANS
Hina Wicklund Delgado Kepoo Alieoy Alima Apo



I am in a storage unit in Honolulu looking for Santa Claus. A real life Hawaiian Santa Claus that is, by the name of Sam Rodrigues. Moments later I am greeted warmly by the Beach Boy and seasoned waterman whose white beard and smiling eyes are a familiar fixture on Oahu's south shore. He is known to most as 'Uncle Sam,' and in true Santa form, the island native has dedicated his life to bringing joy and serving others. In 2009, he retired from Hawaii State Family Services where he worked for over twenty-five years, most recently as a case manager for families in crisis. Retirement doesn't seem to apply to Sam though, since helping others is not work for him; it is simply his way

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of life. Sam continues to provide support and be an inspiration in and out of the water. He teaches surfing and has worked as a Waikiki Beach Boy on the weekends for over twenty years. He is also an experienced outrigger canoe paddler, competing with the Anuenue Canoe Club in races around the world. Sam devotes most of his time now to Surf Rider Spirit Sessions, a local surf mentorship program that helps at-risk and adjudicated teens redirect their lives in a positive direction. Sam helped long-time friend and Spirit Sessions founder Cynthia Derosier develop the program from its inception six years ago, and now serves as Program Manager and head surf instructor. The program is based on a book written by Derosier entitled *The Surfer Spirit* which uses surfing as a metaphor for life. Kids are directed to the program by family court judges and probation officers where they are paired with a volunteer surf mentor who provides guidance and support. When they're not at the beach, the organization operates out of two adjoining units at a storage facility, a cool and thrifty use of space for a non-profit in a tough economy. "Gotta do what you gotta do," Sam tells me.

There are approximately five thousand kids in the juvenile justice system in Hawaii and only sixty-five probation officers. Both Sam and Cynthia, who also spent time teaching in the Hawaii Girls Court, recognized that these kids just needed more supervision and positive mentorship. Through surfing, Spirit Sessions offers an adrenaline outlet and a healthy, supportive community for its participants.

During Spirit Sessions' six years, Sam has helped over 200 youth catch their first waves, and more importantly, he helped them smile and believe in themselves. "The ocean is healing," he says.

Sam was born and raised on Oahu, and spent most of his youth surfing

and playing sports in neighborhoods in Hawaii Kai and Honolulu. He went to Kaimuki High School and played football for a few seasons at the University of Hawaii, before becoming a firefighter. After seven years at the firehouse, the Beach Boy traded in his slippers for boots and moved to Canada where his wife was from.

It was in Canada, in the 1970's that Sam first discovered his calling to social services, though it wasn't before he worked some adventurous odd jobs. Sam built motorhomes where they settled in Kelowna, B.C and worked in the forest as a "swamper." It was dangerous work that involved using dynamite to clear roads for loggers. His role was also more of a safety one. "My friend's dad put me in there and of course I didn't know anything about the bush," he chuckles, "But they knew I had a good background in first aid from firefighting, so if the trailer flipped or there were any emergencies, I could give first aid." After his stint in lumberjacking, Sam took a job in the Human Resources Department at a recreation center. He coached sports on the side and got to know the kids and families in the community. He took a couple of boys from the rec center under his wing that lacked a good support system at home, due to



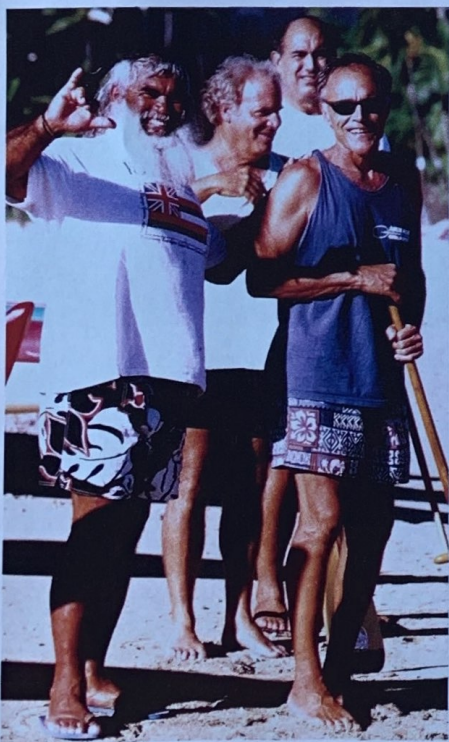
an alcoholic father. "We did all kinds of stuff – I took them to their appointments, we went hiking and fishing and skateboarding. It was communication through recreation, quite like Spirit Sessions," he says. "Sometimes we talked about things, sometimes we didn't. But a trust and friendship grew."

Sam recalls a day he took the boys out on Okanagan Lake in a friend's speed boat. "They were so excited," he remembers. "We stayed out there all day but my friend and I didn't pack a lunch so we started to get hungry." The boys had some peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and offered to share what they had. "I'll never forget that," Sam says, "It was an act of selflessness, and a turning point. I realized I had made a small difference in these boys' lives."

In 1985, Sam made the permanent



move back to Oahu. Based on his experience in Canada, he took a position as a Social Service Aid with the State Department of Human Services. His job involved taking kids to school, or the doctor's, dropping them off at parents' houses and generally assisting families in need. "Mostly, I was there to monitor and record the interactions between family members. I was not there to tell parents what to do, but I could teach them healthy and useful parenting strategies. Unfortunately there were the times when kids needed to be taken out of homes. It could be a very tough job at times." Over the years, Sam was trained



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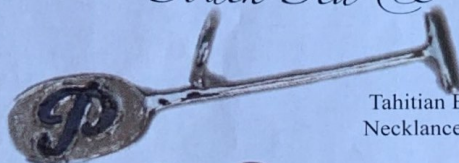
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ISLAND NATIVE SAM RODRIGUES

in and dealt with all aspects of child and family welfare including domestic abuse and violence, substance abuse, adolescent development, aggressive clients, grief, trauma, and suicide prevention. "I've seen it all," Sam says, "But there are lots of happy stories too."

Outside of work and raising his own two kids, Sam continued to teach surfing and work as a Beach Boy on the weekends. He also became the Surfing Santa poster boy for Hilo Hattie, thanks to Cynthia who passed along his picture when she used to work in the company's advertising department. Sam appeared in numerous print and TV ads and a couple of movies to boot. "That was fun," he says, "I even had my very own billboard in Nashville, Tennessee." It's a true story - Hilo Hattie featured Surfing Santa on an eleven by twenty foot billboard ad in the middle of Music City. "Sam will tell you," Cynthia says, "From that point on I kept telling him one day we would work together to help kids. I could see that he was special in a profound and heartfelt way. He is all good mana!"

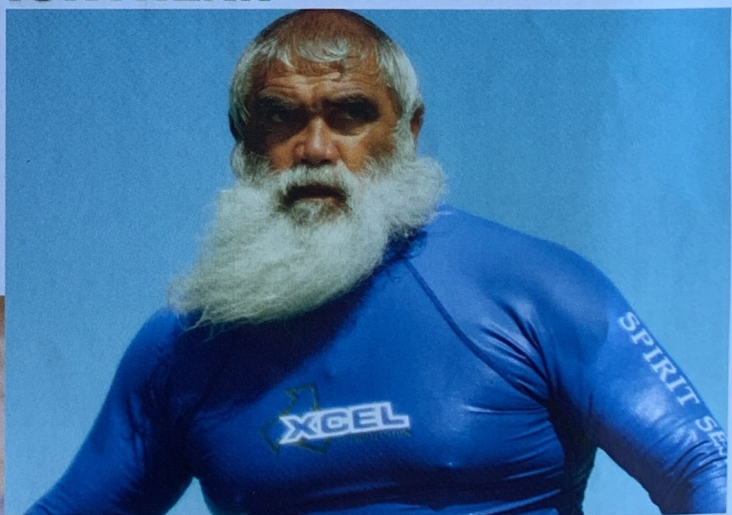
These days, Sam continues to paddle with the Anuenue Canoe Club on the Masters team, a hobby that has taken him to Tahiti, Rarotonga, New Zealand, Australia and France. His crew recently competed in the infamous Moloka'i Hoe race, a 38 mile crossing in the Ka'iwi Channel from Molokai to Oahu. It's a race Sam has paddled so many times he's lost count. "I don't remember - gotta be at least twenty" he guesses. This time around, they didn't have such a good showing. "Eh," Sam shrugs, "We struggled this year, but you have good races and you have bad races. That's life." The team heads to the Cook Islands for their next race.

Also up next for Sam is a possible trip to Japan with a Kids Hurt Too, a non-profit that often partners with Spirit Sessions, which helps children cope with the loss of one or both parents. The organization is planning the Kid's Heart Project, an outreach to young victims of the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster in Japan. "It obviously was a traumatic event for children," Sam explains, "And many kids are now fearful of the ocean, of the 'black water' as it appeared at the time due to the tsunami." The group will assist in providing ocean education and activities, as well as counseling and other services.

For now, Sam is focused on Spirit Sessions and an upcoming move. "We just got the go-ahead and are moving from the storage facility to an office space on Alder Street that has been donated to us." It's good news for



NORTHERN



the non-profit, who receives no funding from the State and must rely on community support to stay afloat. "We have to keep going," he says, "Otherwise, what happens to the kids?"

When asked about the greatest lesson he's taken from all his years of working with people, Sam says, "The importance of really listening, of true conversation. That's how you learn the most and know how to help someone." Last week Sam showed up at my door with a bike seat that he crafted with old parts to fit my cruiser bike. "You mentioned your bike seat was stolen," he says. I was ready to trash the bike because I couldn't find a proper seat to fit the ancient frame.

"You really are Santa Claus," I smile.