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For this 'Ohana Connections Corner I've continued with the story of Fila and her aunt Leilani. Fila is the youth whom I interviewed for the January 2010 issue.

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A Statement of Trust

By Wilma Friesema

“Why we do this guardianship thing, I don’t know,” Leilani grumbled under her breath as we waited outside the judges’ courtroom. “Fila turns eighteen in four months anyway -- this is just one more thing you people make me do.”

“Yeah, but it’s what you wanted, plus it’s four months where you won’t have to deal with the State or the likes of me,” I replied jokingly. Over the eight months that Leilani and I worked together to reconnect her with Fila, her seventeen-year-old niece, Leilani struggled with the demands of becoming a resource caregiver. Now she was becoming a legal guardian. It had been a challenging journey.

Leilani’s involvement with DHS began nearly six years earlier when her brother-in-law sexually abused Fila. To keep Fila safe DHS removed her from the uncle’s home. Unfortunately, this also resulted in Fila losing contact with the rest of her extended family. Years later, the deep hurt and anger from the separation would resurface again and again as Leilani interacted with professionals and encountered “system rules.” Whenever an exchange carried even a whiff of distrust toward the family, her walls went up.

“Frick you, and frick this system!” she’d say. “I don’t need this! I didn’t ask for this! You people called me!”

Whenever that mild cursing flew out of her mouth, I knew Leilani was feeling things were backward: she and the family were being treated like they were guilty until proven innocent rather than the other way around. Time and again we walked her back from that edge of disempowerment and frustration. To her, the many forms, questions, meetings, and requirements -- which are familiar and make sense to those who work in the system -- felt insulting and often confusing.

“I know how to be an auntie, just give her back to us,” she’d often say to Fila’s team of service providers. “My brother-in-law was the one at fault, not the rest of us. We know how to take care of her.”

The team wanted to return Fila to her family, but there were some concerns. Over the years, Fila had learned to avoid intimacy through a rotating cycle of hospitalization and foster placements. Her acting out was intense. Could the family really handle her?

Fila had her fears too. She knew how to work the system, but returning to the family posed the risk that she wouldn’t be protected or she might be rejected. If either happened, she would experience the pain of losing her family all over again.

“I hate you, I wish you were dead!” Fila seethed when Abby, her social worker, told her she had to move in with Leilani. Fila wanted her family back, but not *all* the way back. That was too scary. Unlike at all her previous resource homes, there would be no easy way out from auntie’s. Once she lived with Leilani, she’d have to answer to someone who wouldn’t kick her out and who wouldn’t disappear.

Abby stood firm and Fila moved in with Leilani. The family, in fact, did know how to take care of Fila and they quickly embraced her back into their fold. It wasn’t long before Fila’s anger and destructive behaviors subsided. “I’m doing good,” she’d say over the phone, in a voice that was vibrant and clear. “I like living here with my auntie.”

Entering into the courtroom that morning, I reflected on Fila and Leilani’s journey. As the legal council reviewed the documents and read them into the record, the profound meaning of the procedure permeated the room. It seemed Leilani’s plea to “just let me have my niece back” was truly being heard. Abby, with tears in her eyes, acknowledged the hard work that Leilani and Fila had done to get to that point. James, Fila’s Guardian ad Litem, spoke to the joy of event. Judge Kuriyama, speaking directly to Fila, talked about Fila’s tumultuous history with DHS and expressed wonderment and delight in Fila’s progress. She personally thanked Leilani. Then, through the power of the State of Hawai’i, Judge Kuriyama conferred all parental legal rights and responsibilities from the State to Leilani. It was the ultimate statement of trust in Leilani and the family.

Afterward, when all the hugs, gift giving, and picture-taking were done, I asked Leilani how she felt about the proceeding. “It was good, Wilma,” she said with a softness in her voice. “Today was a good day.”

“Was it worth it,” I asked, “even though Fila will soon be eighteen?”

“Yes, it was worth it,” she replied. “Fila’s finally all the way home.”

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For more information about ‘Ohana Connections work
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