

Together We Can: Remembering Kenoi's Work Toward A Healthier Hawai'i Island

By Randy Kurohara

Hawai'i Island recently lost one of our native sons, a true keiki o ka 'āina, an embodiment of aloha, and a champion of a healthier community: former Mayor Billy Kenoi. Mayor Kenoi showed us that together, and only together, we can create a healthier Hawai'i Island.

Though it would be easy to say healthcare is not directly the responsibility of the County, Mayor Kenoi understood that at the end of the day, the health of each of us is the responsibility of all of us. It is an understanding embodied in the County's motto, "Ola Nā Moku" – every district of the island shall thrive. That understanding guided the County's involvement in efforts to improve healthcare capacity and built an environment for healthy lifestyles.

Under Mayor Kenoi's leadership, the County advocated for a family practice residency program on Hawai'i Island for medical students, the first residency program established on a neighbor island. He also established the Mayor's Active Living Advisory Committee to help guide the County's efforts in encouraging healthy active lifestyles. The committee initiated the Queen's Lei multi-modal path along Ane Keohokālole Highway, the Mayor's Worksite Wellness Recognition Program, a pedestrian safety campaign and the bikeshare program in Kona and Hilo.

Even with the economic difficulties that faced the County during his tenure, Mayor Kenoi never wavered from prioritizing our island's parks as pu'uhonua, safe places for keiki, kūpuna, and family to gather and live healthy lifestyles. New district parks in Pāhoa and Waimea, new neighborhood parks in Hilo and Kona, new playgrounds islandwide, and improvements to some of our island's treasured gathering places such as Edith Kanaka'ole Stadium, the Afook-Chinen Civic Auditorium, Hilo Municipal Golf Course, Richardson Ocean Center, and Mauna Kea Recreation Area are just part of his legacy in improving our island.

Mayor Kenoi also led the charge to bring the Blue Zones Project to Hawai'i Island. Partnering with HMSA and other community organizations, the project worked to bring the lessons of areas with the longest life spans in the world and apply them to our communities. Tens of thousands of our friends and neighbors pledged to make healthier choices, supported by hundreds of workplaces, schools, grocery stores, restaurants, places of worship, and community groups who committed to making the healthy

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choice the easy choice. In 2020, Hawai'i County became the first countywide Blue Zones Project Approved community in the nation.

And who could forget Mayor Kenoi's leadership by example, becoming the first sitting mayor of Hawai'i County to complete the Ironman Triathlon. He also ran in the Ironman Honu, Lavaman, and the Hilo Triathlon – which was founded in part to increase awareness for bicycle safety on East Hawai'i roadways after Mayor Kenoi's brother died in a bicycle-vehicle accident in Hilo.

Everyone has a Billy Kenoi story, stories that will be shared in conversations for years to come. At Community First, we continue to be inspired by his legacy of bringing people together to accomplish the important things we cannot accomplish alone. We will continue to advance his legacy of working for a healthier Hawai'i Island, and of putting community first.

Randy Kurohara is Executive Director of Community First, and formerly served on Mayor Billy Kenoi's cabinet. Community First is a nonprofit founded by Barry Taniguchi in 2014, serving as a neutral forum for the community to come together and as a catalyst for solutions to improve health and lower medical costs on Hawai'i Island. Learn more at communityfirsthawaii.org.