



Clockwise from top left: Susan Cho with tattoo artist Steven Lam. John Hutchinson in his new home. Falling-safely class. Kupuna Aikido Hawaii instructor Bill Doi.

celebrate older americans month

words Lynn Shibuya and Marlene Nakamoto

May is Older Americans Month, which began in 1963 with a proclamation issued by President John F. Kennedy. More than 60 years later, Older Americans Month continues to honor adults 65 and older for their contributions, support their independence, and recognize their value to our communities.

Read on for inspiring stories about our kūpuna.

Kūpuna aikido: the art of falling safely

On O'ahu, older adults like retiree and HMSA member Cynthia Shimabuku are entering a dojo to learn how to fall safely.

It's a top concern for people who have heard stories of people falling and experiencing serious injury and even death, which is backed by data from the Hawai'i Department of Health.

Bill Doi, a 5th degree black belt in aikido with 40 years of experience, teaches aikido to older adults through an organization called Kupuna Aikido Hawaii. In 2017, Doi and other dedicated instructors started a falling safely course, which teaches fall prevention, strengthening and balance exercises, and safe falling techniques.





ROWEN COLLADO

"It's really amazing. We are amazed ourselves. In a short period of time, we've had so many testimonials of people who fell and didn't get injured or experienced minor injury," Doi says. "It's very gratifying to know that we're able to save people from serious injury."

Since it was first offered, more than 1,100 kūpuna have completed the course. The instructors emphasize that the course isn't a martial arts program (the organization has aikido classes for that).

Shimabuku is a proud graduate of the safe falling course. She says the techniques give her peace of mind. "It was very helpful when they taught us how to fall in a way that protects our head and wrists. We practiced falling every week, so the brain remembers it," she says.

Shimabuku encourages people to take the course. "My advice is to try it. I don't think you'll regret it," she says.

The safe falling course is taught once a week for eight weeks at various O'ahu locations. Registration is required; space is limited. Visit Kupuna Aikido Hawaii's website at kupunaaikido.org or email kupunaaikido@gmail.com.



ROWEN COLLADO

Student Cynthia Shimabuku demonstrates falling techniques with instructor Bill Doi.



The HMSA-sponsored home.

Home sweet home on Hawai'i Island

Formerly homeless kūpuna are getting a fresh start in 12 affordable modular homes in Pāhoā. Each unit is a modern 480-square-foot home with a kitchen, bathroom, and lānai.

The nonprofit, HOPE Services Hawai'i, led the project, which was funded by many donors including The Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, Hawai'i Community Foundation, HMSA, OAK Foundation, the Roman Catholic Church in the State of Hawai'i, among others.

The home that HMSA sponsored has soft blue touches on the curtains and exterior paint and sports contemporary décor such as a letter board that reads, "Welcome to your forever home." The unit is furnished with a dresser, couch, bed, and other essentials, which were selected by volunteer and HMSA Kea'au office employee Marlo Lyman-Kekauālua.

Residents pay no more than 30% of their income toward rent as it is subsidized by federal rent assistance

programs like the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the U.S. Veterans Affairs office.

Safe housing is a top social determinant of health, and availability of these homes aligns with nonmedical factors that influence health outcomes and daily life.

"Our intention was to create spaces and places for healing that bring joy and make people feel safe," says HOPE Services Hawaii CEO Brandee Menino.

Lyman-Kekauālua adds, "It was meaningful for me to participate in this project knowing that a kupuna is going into a beautiful and safe home and will be taken off the street."



Scan the QR code to tour the affordable homes.

Learn about tiny homes on the Big Island that support kūpuna health at islandscene.com/more.



Home recipient John Hutchinson shows off his kitchen.

Tattoo with emergency info

It's been nearly a year since Susan Cho got her first tattoo.

In 2022, Cho was having disturbing dreams about getting lost and not being able to get back home. News reports of older people who had gone missing seemed to be occurring more frequently, adding to her anxiety. It could happen to anyone, she thought. "It could happen to me."



She has a smartwatch that asks her if she's fallen after a sudden movement, but she'd often forget to wear it while hurrying out of the house. Or she'd forget to charge it.

To help ensure her safety in unforeseen circumstances, Susan got an ID that would always be with her. The tattoo on the inside of her forearm reads, "If found ... Lisa K Cho," with Lisa's cellphone number.

Susan will celebrate her 71st birthday later this year. The retired owner of Sears Copy & Printing keeps busy with a part-time job and other activities.

The butterfly was Susan's idea; the phone number was her daughter, Lisa's. "I wasn't going to include her phone number, but she insisted," says Susan. "And that really made me feel special and that I was loved."

Susan entrusted Steven Lam of Working Class Tattoos in Honolulu with this endeavor. "He made me feel comfortable and taken care of," says Susan. After an unhurried getting-to-know-you discussion and sketching a design, the actual inking took about five minutes. "It wasn't too bad," she says of the pain. Those concerned about the pain may want to ask their dermatologist to recommend a numbing cream.

Mother and daughter hope that this story encourages others to find ways to safeguard loved ones' well-being in case the unthinkable happens.

"It gives me peace knowing I always have my daughter's name and number. If I get lost, I will be found. I don't worry anymore," says Susan.

"I feel relieved and have no anxiety, and so my bad dreams have gone away." 



Left: The actual inking took about five minutes.
Above: Susan Cho (left), Steven Lam, and Lisa K. Cho.