

Volunteer counts services as indulgent inspirations

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By Michael Tsai

It's worth a couple of hard blinks when a person known for his selfless acts, the kind who craves credit and recognition the way most of us pine for an IRS audit, waves the flag for naked self-interest.

So here's Dr. Douglas Chang, a Waiialae-Kahala veterinarian, trying to frame his volunteer work with the Men's Leadership Hawaii group — projects that range from restoring homes on Kalaupapa to unpacking newly arrived exhibits at the Hawaii Children's Discovery Center to repairing walls at Mookini Heiau in North Kona — as acts of self-indulgence:

"While the projects are good, it's never really about the project itself," Chang says pensively. "The project provides the initiative to develop leadership and other qualities in ourselves. It allows us to stretch out and do things we've never done before and to develop and practice more spiritual qualities."

While Chang chuckles at his own freestyle philosophizing, he regards the intersection of community service and personal reward with great seriousness.

"These projects give us great inspiration to be better," he says. "It's really about that inner project."

Chang was raised in Honolulu but spent summers and holiday breaks working on family farms in Hilo. The eldest son of an occupational therapist and an OB/GYN, Chang grew up with an understanding of the health field and a passion for the outdoors.

After graduating from Kalani High School in 1971, Chang attended the University of Hawaii and Washington State University before completing his veterinary training at Colorado State University.

Chang returned to Hawaii and established Aloha Animal Hospital. From household pets, Chang branched out to exotic animals, eventually developing an expertise in ocean birds. He has provided veterinary care at Sea Life Park and has been contracted by the Department of Land and Natural Resources to treat threatened and endangered birds.

After attending a seminar several years ago, Chang and a group of friends started Men's Leadership Hawaii, a group dedicated to developing leadership qualities through community service. Over the years, Chang and his fellow members have undertaken scores of projects, from their ongoing work with the Kalaupapa National Historical Park to one-off projects like building a new bell tower for the Hawi Jodo Mission.

Members organize the projects themselves, pay for their own travel and lend whatever skills they possess or are able to learn.

"There's a real sense of cooperation," Chang says. "When you work with other people to benefit the community, you connect in ways that are very impactful. It gives you insight on how you can improve.

"When you see one of our projects, you won't know who did it — there are no plaques on the wall," he says. "For us it's a purer way of giving. And what we get in return is the opportunity to develop greater qualities of compassion, love and respect."

——Reach Michael Tsai at mtsai@staradvertiser.com.

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