VOLUNTEERISM

Operating with Compassion

How the pandemic set the stage for opera director Omer Ben Seadia to connect with her community p. 4

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Aloha mai kākou,

Over the past year and a half, I have watched the mounting toll of the COVID-19 pandemic wreak havoc on our community.

This pandemic persists as a stark reminder that you can work hard, have a good job and still find yourself in need of help. And for those who were already experiencing food insecurity, the pandemic put them even more at risk.

While the hardships persist and have highlighted our vulnerabilities as an island community, it has also demonstrated how lucky we are to live in Hawai‘i. We have seen, over and over, people stepping up to help others and protect each other. The pandemic has fostered a tremendous upswelling of empathy, compassion and aloha for one another. Our entire community is working to take care of each other – like family. Just as our mission statement opens, “The people of Hawai‘i are one ‘ohana.”

To me, Hawai‘i Foodbank exemplifies that. ‘Ohana is at the core of everything done here. It’s evidenced not only by our diligent work during the pandemic but also by nearly 40 years of stepping up to help those in need when they need it most. It is truly inspirational. From the moment I stepped through the warehouse doors for the first time, I could instantly feel the undeniable passion, talent and aloha that everyone brings to this very special place.

I believe strongly that the heart of any organization is its people – our staff, volunteers and supporters like you who all work together in service of our mission to strengthen our community. There’s so much we can do together to fight hunger in Hawai‘i, and we’ve learned a lot from the pandemic that we can put into action as we move forward.

We want to keep building upon the success of programs we launched during the pandemic, like our partnership with

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Hawai’i Farm Bureau. This collaborative effort helps us provide healthy, nutritious food to local families in need while limiting food waste and supporting the local economy and agriculture. These kinds of initiatives are an important step towards strengthening our food systems and creating a healthier, more resilient Hawai’i.

At the same time, we will continue to focus resources on our long-established programs while also developing new opportunities to support some of the most vulnerable members of our ‘ohana – our keiki and kūpuna. We are revitalizing our Food 4 Keiki School Pantry program, which faced some obstacles as a result of school closures during the pandemic. Thanks to partners like Wai’anae Coast Comprehensive Health Center, we were able to keep some sites running last year by implementing drive-through and contact-free food pickups. Now that classes are back in session, we are excited to already be back in more than two dozen schools. Additionally, we are working to launch seven new School Pantries on O’ahu and Kaua’i this year. At the same time, we are also piloting a program called Kūpuna Fresh to provide more local, fresh produce to seniors in need of food assistance. Taking care of our cherished kūpuna – who have done so much throughout their lives to take care of us – is a major priority for Hawai’i Foodbank.

The growth and development of these programs will be critical in establishing long-term, safe and equitable food access for everyone who needs it. Consistent access to quality, nutritious food is a fundamental human right. At Hawai’i Foodbank, we are working to be part of the solution in ending the scourge of hunger in Hawai’i and ensuring all members of our ‘ohana have what they need to feed their families.

I am deeply committed to working towards a just, healthy and sustainable future for Hawai’i. I firmly believe that as an island community, rooted in indigenous knowledge and values, we have the unique ability to demonstrate what is possible to the rest of the world. I’m so grateful to be here, and I look forward to working with all of you. Mahalo for welcoming me into your ‘ohana.

With gratitude and aloha,

Amy Marvin
Hawai’i Foodbank President and CEO
Symphony of Support
Hawai‘i Symphony Orchestra hosts free community concerts to help raise funds for Hawai‘i Foodbank.

Hawai‘i Symphony Orchestra hosted a benefit concert titled Broadway to Blockbuster! on Aug. 4 at the Tom Moffatt Waikīkī Shell to help ensure everyone has access to safe, nutritious food in the wake of COVID-19. Admission to the concert was free with a suggested donation of $5 or more per ticket. All proceeds were donated directly to Hawai‘i Foodbank.

Guests enjoyed a performance of light classical, pops and movie music under the stars. The evening’s program, conducted by Joseph Stepec, included a nice family-friendly playlist with familiar songs from movies such as Superman and Star Wars.

The reception was such a success that Hawai‘i Symphony Orchestra hosted an additional benefit recital, Tantalizing Trios, just a few days later to help raise even more funds in support of Hawai‘i Foodbank’s mission. “Hawai‘i Foodbank is deeply touched by the support we’ve received from Hawai‘i Symphony Orchestra and all of the attendees,” said Bevery Santos, director of community relations at Hawai‘i Foodbank. “The proceeds generated from these benefit concerts will help us continue to provide food assistance to the 1 in 6 Hawai‘i residents currently struggling with hunger. Events like these are a bright spot during the pandemic, and this kind of support from the community keeps us going.”

Altogether, proceeds from the events generated more than $14,000 and can help provide food for roughly 30,000 meals.

PetSmart Charities
Did you know that nourishing our ‘ohana includes taking care of our furry family members, too? PetSmart Charities and Feeding America donated 18 pallets of dry dog and cat food, which was distributed with the help of Hawaiian Humane Society – one of our food partner agencies that helps animals. One hundred percent of these donations are given to community members that have fallen on hard times and need assistance feeding their pets.

Greater Good Charities
Greater Good Charities donated 16 pallets of pet food to help feed Kaua‘i’s food-insecure pets. Hawai‘i Foodbank Kaua‘i’s network distributed all 15,340 pounds through food partner agencies like Westside Christian Center, Nourish Kaua‘i, St. William Catholic Church, Northshore Food Pantry, King’s Chapel and Church of the Pacific.
I wondered what it felt like to be in that line and to see your neighbors in that line with you.
When it comes to the world of art, perhaps no greater art form exists than opera. It is considered by many to be the most complete expression – combining all of the elements of art, literature, music, drama and dance. Naturally, this collective coming together of so many people and mediums lends itself to the strongest and purest of human emotions. Instances of pain and joy, frustration and elation, and so many more arise in their most unadulterated forms. Accordingly, in any given operatic performance, there is bound to be something that every member of the audience can identify with.

“Opera is for everyone, and every opera is an invitation. An invitation for interpretation,” says travelling opera director Omer Ben Seadia. “It’s this powerful art form where you can live larger than life, where everything has a huge expression, where you have so many different art forms coming together. Everyone is working together towards this incredible, powerful thing.”

Known for her inventive, thoughtful and socially conscious productions, Omer has been establishing herself as one of the fresh new voices in opera. It’s

While garnering a name for herself in the classic repertoire, Omer Ben Seadia has also won praise for developing and promoting new opera all over the world. She is deeply committed to the development and training of young artists, stating her favorite part about the opera in Hawai‘i is “getting to work with the incredible youth choir of the Hawai‘i Opera Theatre Chorus.”

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been a lifetime commitment for the Israeli director from Tel Aviv. With both parents working in the industry, Omer grew up in the theater and fell in love with opera when she performed in her first production at the age of 15. She would go on to spend more than a decade with the Israeli Opera before beginning her international directing career in the United States — eventually bringing her to Hawai’i.

Omer began working with the Hawai’i Opera Theatre in 2019. She recalls bringing her to Hawai’i.

“There’s so much homegrown talent. There have been amazing opera singers to come out of Hawai’i,” says Omer. “It’s been amazing not only to see people’s talent but also how everyone always shows up so joyfully. I’ve never worked with people so happy to come together to perform and eat and drink and just be joyful together. It’s really, really spectacular.”

She fell in love with the people and decided to move to Hawai’i permanently. Now residing in the North Shore plantation town of Waialua, Omer began spending her time between home and directing at opera companies all over North America. She welcomed this fast-paced lifestyle, but it was all about to change.

“Then the pandemic hit, and it was sort of a massive blow to my industry. Like a lot of industries, we all got grounded,” explains Omer. “I remember, for the first time in my professional career, looking at my schedule and thinking, ‘I don’t know when the next production is going to happen.’ And that was terrifying for many reasons.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on the cultural and creative industry. Performing arts like opera have been hit especially hard in the crisis due to the nature of the craft, which requires the physical presence of an audience. The restrictions during the pandemic meant performance activities were no longer permissible, and people like Omer suddenly found themselves without their outlet — cut off from the human connection that their artistic livelihoods thrive upon.

“The only option we had at our disposal was to stay put. That was the safest thing for everyone to do. But, like a lot of people, I was feeling very helpless – feeling like the world was caving in around us, and I was just sitting at home,” Omer remembers.

“For someone like me who is used to being so active, I really wanted to find something that could immediately help. Something that could have an impact right away. And that’s when Hawai’i Foodbank came into my life.”

Omer began searching for ways to roll up her sleeves, contribute in a meaningful way and connect with her community. She heard Hawai’i Foodbank was still functioning as an essential service, and she got started right away by volunteering in the warehouse. She spent her early shifts sorting produce and dry goods with other volunteers and staff members who helped her learn the ropes quickly — not only in regards to the physical labor but also in terms of absorbing the mission.

“The Foodbank taught me that hunger can impact anyone. I think when I was coming into it, I sort of had this image like a lot of people have of what hunger looks like and what food need looks like. I think if Hawai’i Foodbank has taught me anything, and if the pandemic has taught me anything, it is that food insecurity looks like a lot of different things — and it will surprise you.”

This realization took on an even more dramatic look in the upcoming weeks. In order to meet the growing need, Hawai’i Foodbank began deploying a series of large-scale Pop-Up Food Distributions across O’ahu in order to provide emergency food, fresh produce and other items to vulnerable households who lost access to food during the pandemic. The first distribution was set to take place at Waipio Soccer Complex, and Omer did not hesitate to sign up. She was among the first on the front lines to distribute food.

“I was truly astonished by the amount of people that showed up that day. When we saw the sea of thousands of cars lined up, I think it really blew everyone away in terms of what the actual need is. We were astonished. Talk about a reality check.”

Four thousand households received food that day, and Omer interacted with nearly every one of them. And, just as every opera is an invitation for interpretation, every interaction Omer and her fellow volunteers encountered that day offered a new perspective — and new connections.

“It was a teachable day. Everyone walked away knowing more. I wondered what it felt like to be in that line and to see your neighbors in that line with you,” reflects Omer. “I know there was some frustration and shame and fear, but I also think there was a sense of comfort. Even though you’re separated, there’s something about knowing you’re not alone in this.”
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She holds onto this sense of connection and, even with her work productions slowly getting back underway, continues to find opportunities to volunteer with Hawai‘i Foodbank. In just one year, Omer has worked 60 volunteer shifts, providing more than 300 hours of volunteer service – and she encourages others to give it a try, too.

“I just want people to know that volunteering is for everyone, and the Foodbank does such a great job. I’ve had the fortune to volunteer in all these different avenues, which has made me feel like there is a way for everyone to volunteer that works for them.”

For Omer, each volunteer experience during the pandemic has shed a new, yet familiar, light on the world around her. Like the operas she’s directed, it’s created this collective human event that enables everyone to relate to one another and have more empathy.

“I think that’s at the heart of what the Foodbank does. It answers this very visceral need in the community. Especially now. No matter where you come from or what your financial situation was or what your employment situation is – the pandemic sort of leveled the playing field, and it hit everybody. The Foodbank is one of those organizations that is rare in that everyone knows what the mission is and how much it does. It’s something we can all get behind – regardless of party or politics or where you stand on any issue. It’s so easy to relate to,” says Omer with a smile. “Hawai‘i Foodbank is for everyone.”

Just as an opera can make us hear, feel and see the world differently – Omer stands tall as an example of the good that can come out of this pandemic. It offers us a reflection of who we are, how we connect to one another and what it means to be human. 🌸
The family that volunteers together
Mother and son duo volunteer together, inspire each other and those around them

There’s nothing quite like the bond between a mother and her son. It’s a special connection. For Erin Leake and her 14-year-old son Jaevyn Navarro, it’s a bond that continues to inspire.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, both Erin and Jaevyn have been steadfast in their involvement with Hawai’i Foodbank Kaua’i by volunteering at a variety of Pop-Up Food Distributions. On top of that, Jaevyn also volunteers at the Līhu’e warehouse after school.

When speaking with Erin, she hopes volunteering helps Jaevyn gain an understanding of what it means to be a kind human being.

Erin became a mother at an early age. She describes her experience openly, looking back on that time in her life, “What other people had to say triggered a lot of self-centered parenting on my behalf. Their words hurt.”

She explains she was too concerned about proving people wrong that parenting became more about herself than what her son needed her to be. She started questioning herself, “How does he need me to support him? How do I become the best parent for him? How do I properly nurture him?”

After reflecting deeply on these questions, Erin humbly vowed to do everything she can to be the best parent for her son. Today, she rests confidently knowing Jaevyn is “ten times the person [she] ever was at his age.”

Growing, learning and volunteering together is a blessing for the mother and son duo. Not only has it brought Erin and Jaevyn closer together, but it has also exposed them to a community of amazing people. She is truly grateful.

“I hope to be an example for my little brother and sisters along with my peers — just as they are for me.”

Jaevyn has so many positive role models in his life, and – as his parent – I am truly blessed.”

Erin hopes to influence others to volunteer – particularly those close to her and her son’s ages. She wants to guide her community’s youth to lead courageously by example. It’s a sentiment that her son holds close to his heart, as well.

“Don’t care about what others think of you,” Jaevyn says firmly. “What’s cool may not always be right, and – most times – what’s cool doesn’t always help you be a better person. I am learning to lead by example.”

Jaevyn hopes to gain experience so that one day he will be able to lead and organize a food distribution, himself. He loves having the chance to give back to families who are in need. He hopes to encourage everyone to pay an act of kindness forward.

When asked who motivates him to volunteer, Jaevyn said, “Family.”

He pointed out his mom; his uncle Addison Bulosan, Hawai’i Foodbank Kaua’i Advisory Board member; and close family friend Tiffany Sagucio, Miss Kaua’i Filipina 2019. He watches them work productively in the community – always showing up with smiles and unselfishly giving back.

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“I hope to be an example for my little brother and sisters along with my peers – just as they are for me.”
For the past 30 years, Food Drive Day has played an integral role in maintaining our year-round food supply. This year, we went virtual in an effort to prioritize the safety of our communities. Even with the absence of our physical donation sites, your kōkua did not waver. In less than 24 hours, you collectively raised food for more than 206,000 meals. This response comes at a critical time. Since the onset of COVID-19, hunger in Hawai‘i has increased by nearly 60 percent. This includes 1 in 6 residents and more than 82,000 keiki.

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During our annual February - May 2021

to our Donors

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