

## Wai'anae High media talent goes full circle with video venture

By Will Hoover

Advertiser Wai'anae Coast Writer

WAI'ANAE - A vision born in a Wai'anae High School classroom is quickly taking root in a fledgling video production and multimedia design company housed in Makaha's old Cornet Building and built around a nucleus of fresh-faced technicians in their teens and early 20s.

Makaha Studios has no "studio," and not even enough paint to complete interior renovations of the former real estate office turned production facility.

Yet in just eight months the for-profit start-up — the offshoot of a phenomenally successful high school media education program — has attracted so much interest that it is booked through December to produce, shoot or edit commercials, promotional videos and public service announcements for clients ranging from local businesses to television stations and government agencies.

But Makaha Studios' greatest potential may lie in what it could mean to the area's young people.

The vision is simple, but with far-reaching implications: provide a chance for graduates to work in a fascinating, high-paying field in Wai'anae, then funnel part of the profits back into the community in a self-sustaining effort that will not only grow the business but inspire local youth by giving them employment opportunities.

It's called a social enterprise business model.

Some other area organizations also use the model, but what Makaha Studios is doing represents a dramatic shift, said Joseph Lapilio, executive director of the Wai'anae Coast Coalition, a community development corporation.

"What's unusual with Makaha Studios is the nature and size of their success, and that they are a non-traditional community-based economic initiative," Lapilio said. "It's a new enterprise and it's one that you wouldn't normally associate with Wai'anae. It brings in a whole new industry to the community with high-paying jobs that the students from our high school are excited about."

### BORN FROM SEARIDER

The idea for Makaha Studios — like most of its employees — came from Wai'anae High's Searider Productions.

Each member of the company's five-person production staff, for example, is a graduate of or adviser to that program, which rose from humble beginnings in 1993 to state and national recognition under the leadership of founder and program director Candy Suiso.

As the honors escalated for Searider Productions — or SP, as it's known — Suiso said requests for SP students to produce Web designs, brochures, training videos, documentaries, and public service announcements exploded. Suiso said SP was glad to comply whenever possible because it was all a part of the learning process.

"Then, people said, 'We want to hire you,' and we'd have to say, 'You know, we are a school not a business,'" Suiso said.

But Suiso realized there could be an opportunity for her students as well as the Wai'anae Coast in so much multimedia interest — and the idea for Makaha Studios began to formulate.

For months, she and others, including SP instructor Ric Gresia and SP graduate and instructor John Allen III, kicked around the possibilities and began devising a strategy.

Allen, now also the company's creative director, believes the social enterprise concept will succeed the same way Searider Productions did — by aiming high.

"It's a natural progression for us," Allen said. "Makaha Studios expects to be a high-



*Brainstorming at Makaha Studios are sales director Linda Brock and creative director John Allen III, in the foreground, with motion graphic artist Chad Brown, at left, Web developer/intern Bill Evangelista, 20, and college intern Jonalyn Arao, 18.*

**Photos by JEFF WIDENER**  
**The Honolulu Advertiser**

## AT A GLANCE

### Makaha Studios

**Employees:**

*7 (five-person production team and two-person business team)*

**Phone:**

*695-8200*

**Address:**

*P.O. Box 233  
Makaha, HI 96792*

**Learn More:**

*[www.makahastudios.com](http://www.makahastudios.com)*

*Makaha Studios is housed in the old Cornet Building.*

level production company and we're not going to lower the bar. We brainstorm. We sit around and let the ideas ping off one another. For us the difference is that we don't normally close off the creative process even after the idea has been refined. Sometimes the best ideas come in the last five minutes.

"We've had to almost reinvent the wheel in terms of coming up with our business model."

Last April that model won top honors in the University of Hawai'i Business Plan Competition's Social Enterprise Category. The team used the \$20,000 prize money to seed the Makaha Studios startup.

## SEEDING THE COMMUNITY

Part of that business plan calls for a substantial portion of the company's net income to be used to help fund Searider Productions and similar Wai'anae Coast student projects.

Why give away profits when Makaha Studios could easily hire SP graduates anyway? Suiso said it's because those involved with Makaha Studios are committed to the social enterprise concept.

"Everybody employed at Makaha Studios has a vested interest in Searider Productions," she said. "They have all come from the program or been a part of it as staff or advisers."

Added Gresia, who is now business director of Makaha Studios, "We want to keep talent here and we want to attract talent that has already left the community because there weren't many jobs here."

Already the company is employing interns who have been through the SP program, and next year it will begin hiring SP grads completing their final year of college on the Mainland, he said.

"I believe that what we are trying to do out here is destiny," said Linda Brock, who left her job at KHON TV to accept a position as sales and marketing director at Makaha Studios because she believed in the idea.

"They're dreaming big from Wai'anae and they aren't afraid to talk about it. Is it optimistic? Is it idealistic? Yes. But what is it going to take to turn things around out here? It's going to be people who have a lot of belief, plus the talent and ability to make it happen."

Lapilio, of the Wai'anae Coast Coalition, said the concept will also give Wai'anae a needed boost of prestige.

"They aren't going to be able to hire every kid who comes out of the Searider Productions program," he said. "So, Wai'anae kids will have a chance to have an influence in other communities and in other companies in other states."

## STAYING PUT

One student who gets excited about the prospect of one day working for Makaha Studios is Martinea Trippett, 17, a Wai'anae High School senior.

"Yes, definitely, I'd like to be part of it," said Trippett during a break in the location shooting of a film she was directing for Searider Productions. "A lot of us are passionate about video production."

In the past that passion had to be transported elsewhere. But now, Wai'anae High students such as herself could be able to practice their chosen field right in their own backyard.

That, in turn, will allow Makaha Studios to grow, which will mean additional funding for Searider Productions and more opportunities for other SP students.

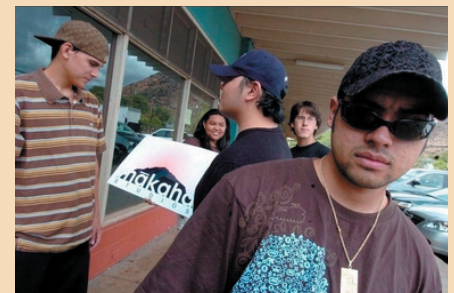
"It's like a circle," Suiso said. "We want to be sustainable because we can't always be asking people for money."

As a Department of Education employee, Suiso's only affiliation with Makaha Studios is as a "fan and supporter." But like others, she's convinced Makaha Studios is a way to transform and invigorate the entire Wai'anae Coast.

"This is how we're going to build community," she said. "If everybody leaves and they don't come back, our community will continue to die. But once we start bringing back those graduates, and we create jobs — and I mean good jobs — then this becomes community-building."



*Martinea Trippett, 17, hopes to eventually work at Makaha Studios. She's in Wai'anae High School's Searider Productions program and Tuesday directed filming at a Makaha healthcare facility.*



*Outside Makaha Studios are, from left, Bill Evangelista, Jonalyn Arao, John Allen III, Daniel Headland and Chad Brown (in the sunglasses).*



*Daniel Headland, 18, is an intern animator at Makaha Studios.*

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