

# PACIFIC BUSINESS NEWS

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## Makaha Studios' mission: To help Waianae prosper

Four-year-old film/media company expands rapidly as its reputation grows

Pacific Business News (Honolulu) - by [Linda Chiem](#) Pacific Business News

The founders of **Makaha Studios** have a mission: Support the Waianae community, its residents and future work force.

Originally set up in 2006 as a spinoff of Searider Productions — a flourishing journalism and creative media program for students at **Waianae High School** — Makaha Studios has taken off, establishing itself as one of Hawaii's most sought-after film and media companies.

Co-founder and Chief Creative Officer John Allen III told PBN that the intent of the for-profit Makaha Studios is to create a self-sustaining social enterprise to put the Waianae Coast on the map and create work opportunities for future generations.

Allen, along with partners Ric Gresia, who serves as business director, and Linda Brock, who now is director of programming and community relations for PBS Hawaii, set out to build a pipeline of high-technology opportunities for the traditionally blue-collar West Oahu community.

It's also a Act 221 high-technology company, qualifying it for state tax credits.

“Makaha Studios is a social enterprise we set up that would either fund positions in the community or scholarships for students at the program so the money is funneled back down here so we can continue to operate,” said Allen, who teaches full-time at the high school although his position is funded entirely by Makaha Studios, not the state Department of Education. “It's a great way to give back in that sense that it's driven by the people and the community. We want to keep this alive so we can provide jobs for students who study on the Mainland to come back and live here.”

It has been enormously successful in its first four years in business. With a 581 percent increase in revenues between 2007 and 2009, it is making its debut on PBN's list of Hawaii's 50 fastest-growing companies by being No. 1.

Known for its high-quality productions, narratives, commercials, documentaries and public service announcements, Makaha Studios has racked up a clientele of corporate clients and nonprofits including The City & County of Honolulu and Kamehameha Schools.

The staff remains humble — 12 employees working out of an approximately 3,000-square-foot studio in the old Cornet Building. But they dream big.

And many of those employees are graduates of Waianae High School's Searider Productions.

“This class of students were some of the best and brightest we ever had, and to bring them back we thought we should have a company — it would be ridiculous not to,” Allen said of starting up Makaha Studios in August 2006. “Definitely, the dream is to become big enough where we can sustain the industry out here. If we don't dream like that, then we're doing a disservice to ourselves.”

Allen said the studio's “bread and butter” is a contract with The W.K. Kellogg Foundation to film corporate events and produce various marketing materials. The two-year-old contract was recently extended to 2013. He declined to disclose the contract amount, but the studio's revenue grew from about \$157,000 in 2007 to more than \$1 million in 2009.

MEDIA



Just last month, the Kellogg Foundation went even further by awarding a \$4 million grant to Searider Productions and Mao Organic Farms for a youth education and entrepreneurship program.

Allen said the program will function as what he described as a “work-for-hire division.”

“We want to grow the economy to be more than just a laboring community and we can provide the opportunity to really leverage that labor mentality in a creative sense,” he said. “We don’t want to stop at just the 12 of us. We’re very humble; we’re really about the [social enterprise] model because it’s what you do with what you have.”

As the for-profit Makaha Studios flourishes, so does Searider Productions, which has grown to include 30 different media courses covering film and video production, journalism, web design, yearbook, marketing, sports programming and morning bulletins.

That is not to say that the two entities compete for work. Allen said the productions have distinct and defining characteristics.

For example, Makaha Studios might take on a project that requires a more commercial or long-form narrative touch while Searider Productions will take on projects that might be issues-driven or complement the existing curriculum.

### **Makaha Studios**

**Percent growth 2007-09: 581.44%**

*Video production, post-production, multimedia design*

Co-founder and Chief Creative

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