

THE KALAUPAPA MEMORIAL ACT

“I want to see a monument honoring the people of Kalaupapa before I die. I want to see all the names. These people are my friends – even though many of them died before I came here and I didn’t know them personally, in spirit we are all together. I know their hearts and souls.”

--- Olivia Breitha, 90, who was sent to Kalaupapa in 1937 and is the author of the book, “Olivia: My Life of Exile in Kalaupapa.”

Aloha Mr. Chairman, Representative Steve Pearce, Representative Donna M. Christensen and to members of the House Resources Subcommittee on National Parks with a special aloha to Hawaii Representative Neil Abercrombie.

From 1866 to 1969, an estimated 8,000 people from all over Hawaii were taken from their families and forcibly isolated on the Kalaupapa peninsula, not because they had committed a crime, but because they were diagnosed with a disease; leprosy. At a time when they needed love, medical attention and support from their family, friends and community more than ever, those affected by the disease – men, women and children – were sent away to make a new life for themselves under the most difficult of circumstances. Hawaii’s isolation laws regarding people with leprosy were not abolished until 1969 – nearly 25 years after medicine had been introduced.

The overriding justification for such drastic measures was said to be the protection of society at large. Even after the discovery of medicine to control the disease, new patients were still separated from their families because of society’s fear, misconceptions and prejudice. The 8,000 people sent to Kalawao and Kalaupapa were denied their freedom and the opportunity to lead normal lives (they were not even allowed to raise their children) simply for the peace of mind of the general public. At least 90 percent of those isolated on the peninsula were Kanaka Maoli, or Native Hawaiian.

Despite the overwhelming odds they faced, many of the people of Kalaupapa went on to live remarkable lives and their contributions to society have been recognized in Hawaii, nationally and around the world.

Most of the 8,000 people relocated to Kalaupapa died on the peninsula and were buried there, but a vast majority of those graves can not be found. The National Park Service staff of Kalaupapa National Historical Park, established by Congress and signed into law in 1980, has been able to record less than 1,300 graves – and many of those are no longer marked. Family members searching for the graves of loved ones go away brokenhearted and frustrated that there seems to be no evidence of the existence of their ancestor or ancestors.

Because Hawaii kept complete records of those sent to Kalawao and Kalaupapa, it would be possible to list the name of every individual on the monument, providing a sense of pride and closure to family members in search of their loved ones. A memorial with the names of everyone sent to Kalaupapa would provide visitors with a deep sense of the magnitude of the sacrifices made by those sent to the peninsula and their families who were left behind.

It is believed that this would be the first monument of its kind anywhere in the world that would honor individuals who had leprosy in this way and, considering Kalaupapa’s significant history, it is fitting that this unique memorial be established at Kalaupapa National Historical Park.

The idea of a monument to honor and perpetuate the memories of the people of Kalaupapa is not a new one, but only in the last few years has a grassroots movement taken shape and gained momentum. The recent effort was started by Piolani Motta, who has been unable to find the grave of her grandmother, and who feels strongly that everyone isolated at Kalaupapa and Kalawao should be recognized as individuals. Piolani’s proposal was welcomed by the Kalaupapa community and became a priority of Ka ‘Ohana O Kalaupapa, when the group was formed in 2003.

Because of the nature of the way the records were kept and to ensure flexibility in the design of the project, the memorial has been proposed to be built in two parts: the first part would contain the names of the first 5,000 people sent to the Kalaupapa peninsula, most of whom lived at the original settlement at Kalawao; the second part would contain the names of approximately 3,000 individuals, most of whom lived on the Kalaupapa side of the peninsula. Because record keeping became more complicated after 1900, additional time will be needed to accurately compile the list of the last 3,000 individuals. The first 5,000 names are easily accessible.

The 'Ohana is dedicated to promoting the value and dignity of each individual who was exiled to the peninsula beginning in 1866. 'Ohana members include the people of Kalaupapa, family members, friends, state officials, interested citizens and others who have a longtime interest in the future of Kalaupapa and her residents. With the population of Kalaupapa decreasing, it was deemed of vital importance to bring together people who would support and help do what is necessary to ensure that the remaining members of the Kalaupapa community be able to live out their lives in this, their home and have the assurance that their history will be preserved and passed down for the education and inspiration of present and future generations.

The mission of the 'Ohana is: "E Ho'ohanohano a E Ho'omau...To Honor and To Perpeuate." We work in cooperation with the Kalaupapa community, the Hawaii State Department of Health, the National Park Service and other agencies to promote the dignity and rights of the people of Kalaupapa and the legacy of the 8,000 people sent there. In a short time, we have demonstrated our ability to develop partnerships and coordinate worthy endeavors, such as restoring dialysis to Kalaupapa so that anyone needing those services could remain at home and not have to be relocated again.

The 'Ohana welcomes the opportunity to establish a monument to the people of Kalaupapa. We thank Congressman Ed Case for introducing this bill and to Congressman Neil Abercrombie for serving as co-sponsor. We also know we can count on support from our Hawaii Senators, Daniel Inouye and Daniel Akaka, who have made many visits to Kalaupapa.

More than 25 years ago, Congress recognized the national and international significance of the history and legacy of Kalaupapa when it authorized the creation of Kalaupapa National Historical Park. The park's most valuable resource is – and will always be – the people whose extraordinary lives continue to inspire and educate people from Hawaii, the nation and around the world. A monument honoring the people is a fitting tribute to them – and to their family members who carry on their legacy.

We hope this House subcommittee will support our efforts and we look forward to this bill moving ahead in Congress.

Mahalo (thank you) for this opportunity.