

Season of Light

By: Amy Hayoung Lee, Hawai'i Care Choices

Over a hundred candle lights danced around as people closed their eyes and remembered their loved ones. Families shared both tears and smiles as they held their candles close to their hearts. When Mark Yamanaka's voice and acoustic guitar filled up the space with a heart-moving singing of "Oh Holy Night," every individual in the room was reminded that this season, no matter how difficult, can be filled with light.

Holidays may be the merriest time of the year for many, but for some, it can be a season of longing and grief - especially if their loved ones are no longer with them. Hawai'i Care Choices, formerly Hospice of Hilo, organized the "Season of Light" event for the community on December 13, 2023 at Wailoa State Park from 6pm-7pm, to ensure that both individuals and families going through bereavement were provided with a space of healing and hope during this time of the year. This Candlelight Tribute ceremony was a free public event, open to all East Hawai'i community members. Attendees were encouraged to bring a photo of their loved ones, but all other else - candles, chairs, cookies, beverages, and even a special memorial keepsake box filled with items to help create a personal altar - were provided.

The evening's program began with music by Mark Yamanaka, a 14-time Nā Hōkū Hanohano award winner and Hilo's beloved musician. Highlights of the program included: *Reflections of Christmases Past* by Madeline Brooks as she shared about how her deceased, beloved husband who was the Santa at Prince Kuhio mall for over seventeen years, brought joy and hope for countless children in Hilo. A story of *Christmas Present* was shared by Hawai'i Care Choices spiritual counselor, Catherine Czerepak. Bereavement counselor, Rev. Jihey Roach, shared about the hope and prayer of *Christmas Future*. Lastly, after multi-faith blessings, Kahu Brian Welsh lead the group into the candlelight tribute. As each candle began to glow row by row, sadness soon transformed into gratitude and comfort. Together, the small tea light candles brought a bigger wave of light, representing the strength and inspiration that we can also bring for one another.

Christina Robledo from Community First Hawai'i shared, "It was so touching to hear stories, words of encouragement, and poetry from the speakers involved. I went in memorial of my late grandma, and it was emotional and comforting for me to be with others who are and have been feeling the same as I have. I hope to see this event grow

because what it offers is so comforting for a community where one loss is felt by so many. Our keepsake memorial box is now sitting on our shelf; it is a beautiful reminder.”

The Season of Light event will be held annually during the winter holiday season. To learn about similar events throughout 2024 or to receive more information about the free community bereavement support programs, please subscribe to Hawai'i Care Choices on their website www.hawaiicarechoices.org or email care@hawaiicarechoices.org.

About the Organization:

Hawai'i Care Choices, formerly Hospice of Hilo, is a private, non-profit 501(c)(3) organization that has compassionately provided support to individuals with serious or life-limiting illness. Since 1983, they have continued to deliver palliative care, hospice care, and bereavement services for the East Hawai'i community.

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