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Astronomy for the Future
By Hōkūnani Sanchez

Aloha, my name is Hōkūnani Sanchez, and I was a Maunakea Scholar from Honoka‘a High and Intermediate School.

I was involved with Canada-France-Hawai‘i Telescope throughout my high school career, and currently work at W. M. Keck Observatory for the second time as a summer hire in their finance office.

Before entering high school, I didn’t have any interest in astronomy besides appreciating the alluring night sky. Funny thing is, if it wasn’t for my name, I probably wouldn’t have been involved in astronomy.

My biology teacher, Ms. Alison English, explained that students could write a proposal about any question they had about the universe and submit them to a relatively new program called Maunakea Scholars. The winners would get telescope time at an observatory on top of Maunakea that best fit researching their question.

I didn’t consider joining this program until Ms. English pulled me to the side after class and said, "Oh, my gosh, Hoku, with your name, how funny would it be if you joined Maunakea Scholars?" After she said that, in a heartbeat I decided to apply just because in Hawaiian my name means "beautiful star."

Little did I know that this program would be a life-changing experience for me. Partnering with a classmate, we submitted a proposal to study a dark nebula called LDN-483 and wanted to research more on the birth and growth of stars. Later in the school year, during the Maunakea Scholars award ceremony, I didn’t think that anything would come from our proposal because an opportunity to use a telescope was so mind-blowing and wish-fulfilling that I didn’t even consider it possible for me to be granted with this.

After thinking that, I heard my name called, and I looked up and saw my name plastered on the screen as a winner. The fact that we, high school students, used a telescope that astronomers and Ph.D. students used was out of this world. From then on, my passion for astronomy continued.

Throughout our research, we were heavily involved with CFHT, from volunteering with them within the astro-community to attending astronomy talks. Through this program, we discovered an irregular object.

For the first time, the Honoka‘a High school students placed second in the West Hawaii Science fair and got to the state fair to present. Besides all the things learned, I also made

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relationships with people that would last a lifetime, particularly Mary Beth Laychak and Doug Simons at CFHT, who started Maunakea Scholars.

The opportunities from CFHT and Keck helped me get accepted into college, internships and especially with a job at W. M. Keck Observatory in their finance office during my college summer break. The job the observatory offered me helps me and my family, given that money is not easy to come by.

More than before, telescopes are involved in the community, and Keck uses them in Akamai Interns. Both have outreach programs to connect with the community by trying to get involved with the keiki.

Although my future goal is not to be an astronomer, having personal connections with astronomers pushed me to further my education when I doubted myself in applying to colleges.

Astronomy taught me that there's so many things in this universe that we may never know. Sometimes we need to just keep wondering in order to increase our knowledge and become connected not only with one another, but to the world.

I believe it's my kuleana (responsibility) to become a teacher, teach young keiki to always show aloha, and never stop wondering and learning about the beautiful universe we live in. My passion for the beautiful stars will never cease, my heart will always be at my roots in Hawaii, and maybe someday in the future, I can give back to the people who made me who I am today.

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