PACIFIC PORTRAITS

The People Behind the Scenes at Pacific University

VOLUME 1

BEE TREE
PACIFIC UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES
Forest Grove, Oregon
The "Bee Tree", an iconic ivy-covered tree that stood on the Pacific University campus for many years, was already old and hollow when pioneer Tabitha Brown arrived in Oregon in 1846. Mrs. Brown started a home for orphans that would grow into Pacific University. According to the Forest Grove News-Times, the tree was "said to have housed a swarm of bees who furnished the little old lady with honey which she sold to buy provisions for her orphan children."
From her corner offices in Clark Hall Edna Gehring watches as students leave the Pacific Campus and enter the world away from school. Her brown wavy hair flows with a spray of gray, as she sits poised with a bashful smile. On campus “Auntie” embodies the maternal figure that is nurturing and familiar. “That is my true purpose,” she says. “Making sure the student is a successful person in society.” “Auntie,” as she is known, is the Director of the Hawai’i Outreach and Programming Office. “I finally have one title.” After over thirty years at Pacific University, “Auntie Edna” has had many titles: Director of the Underserved in Sight Health Careers Opportunity Program for the College of Optometry, Director of Multicultural Services and Learning Support Services (LSS), and Nā Haumāna O Hawai’i (NHOH).

In Hawai’i calling someone “auntie” or “uncle” and having no relation to that person is customary. She serves as a mother-like figure to the students from Hawai’i, as well as the Director of the Hawai’i Outreach program. She not only deals with kids from Hawai’i but she also helps with the LSS center helping students who really needed it. She is also very involved with the football team and its players. When a football player for example breaks his hand or needs help doing their assignments she’s there to help.

Her spirit fills the room as everyone she encounters kowtows and shows respect to the highest of council. The Hawai’ian word, ‘Ohana, or family, truly exemplifies what she offers to Pacific’s community. “Auntie” not only shares the Hawai’ian culture with the university, but also offers the encouragement, which fosters
individual success within our school’s community. Since 1983, “Auntie” has assisted with the NHOH program. As most of the students are thousands of miles from their actual families, “Auntie” is there to offer her love and support.

With a soft smile she speaks to some of the NHOH club officers to talk about the upcoming events such as Thanksgiving, and Lu’au. Pacific’s annual Lu’au is the biggest event of the year for the school and brings in family from all over the world. The amount of preparation and time spent to make the event possible is year round. It is Auntie Edna and her group student advisors that make this possible. Her passion is to help students succeed in bringing some of that “Aloha spirit” to Pacific University. In the meetings Auntie speaks only when spoken to and only when she needs to. As the planning commences, it is the students discussing the programs that are going to be happening for the weekend and the drivers for these events. Auntie gives the students the power to make the event their own, and illustrate to the student the influence they have on the project. “Auntie you are going to the football game in Washington anyway, and we need a driver?” A student says with a chuckle. Auntie leans in from the side of the table and states “See if anyone can drive and if not, maybe I can drive.” Auntie near the head of the table, smirks and smiles with pride as each student stands with their own individuality.

Auntie Edna can come off as the nicest lady you’ll ever meet but if you don’t listen to what she tells you she can really chew your ears off. Just like a mother who scolds their kids for being bad or like a coach scolding their players to pick up the pace. She yells and scolds because she cares and wants the students to do well and see them succeed. Edna not only served as a council for these young adults but also as someone to help challenge them and help them to grow and mature into fine members of society. She knows most every student from Hawai’i’s background and takes ownership of his or her well-being.

A step in to Auntie Edna’s office in Clark Hall is like stepping into a home in Hawai’i. Her office is furnished with all sorts of old family photos and various Hawai’ian printed decorations. She is a part of the true Pacific family, a Pacific graduate herself, along with her husband and daughter as well. “My daughter was raised in this. She even was dancing in Luau when she was little.” The pictures of Aunty in years past are breathtaking. Almost like royalty, her hair so grand and beautifully done up. Her smile shines bright as each picture seems to be happier than the next. In over thirty years the Pacific grad has seen it all; she tells us about stories about bailing some students out of jail and even having to go to court for them. Like a mother goose looking out for her flock she appreciates each one. “I love them all. The good students and the bad ones; my gray hairs are from the bad ones.” Going out of her way to help students in need really shows
the genuine love and support she has for them. Aunty Edna really is “always there” for the students here at Pacific. She takes pride in what she does helping any student in need. Her connection to her students continues long after they have graduated she frequently is invited to weddings of old students.

Most of the time you can see her, a small brown skinned older woman with ashy, wavy hair up to her shoulders, walking around campus representing the NHOH in the club’s jacket or t-shirt. She is very kindhearted and soft spoken. Aunty is the type of person who will make anyone feel relaxed and at ease. Almost like connecting with a really good friend, Aunty is easy to talk to. She instills the values of family, allowing the students to take center stage and illustrate the assets they offer to the community. Never the one to want to be the spotlight Auntie shines brighter as a reflection of all the lights she illuminates.