

From Neglect to Healing and Joy: Coming to Terms With a Fragmented Past

By Richard Walker January 22, 2012

For decades, musician-singer Sonia Lien hid her Native Hawaiian heritage. Her birth was the result of a 1934 affair between her mother, who was married to a Navy officer at the time, and a Native Hawaiian man while en route from Los Angeles to Hawaii onboard the S.S. *Lurline*.

The officer divorced Lien's mother, and mother and daughter were ostracized by their socially prominent family in Virginia. As a child, Lien bounced between foster homes in California and family members back east who took her in from time to time.

It wasn't until Lien decided to tell an inspirational tale about her journey from a childhood of abuse and neglect to a life of recovery and joy that a final healing took place. Using the few details left by Lien's mother—as well as ship passenger manifests from that 1934 voyage—friends discovered that Lien's father was noted swimmer Sam Alapai Kahanamoku, a 1924 Olympic bronze medalist. Kahanamoku's brother, Duke, was an Olympic swimmer and is a swimming and surfing hall of fame who also served as sheriff of Honolulu and acted in 14 films, among them *Mister Roberts* with Henry Fonda and James Cagney.

On August 24, 2010, she joined her long-lost family in Hawaii at the 120th anniversary of the birth of Duke Kahanamoku, her uncle. The acceptance and love shown to her by the Kahanamoku family helped Lien accept “what I had been told was unacceptable: My mother had a brief affair with a Hawaiian man that resulted in my birth in 1935. Both she and I were abandoned by my prejudiced family from Virginia. I had internalized this rejection—until now.”

Once that happened, “A thorn planted in my heart at birth has been removed,” she wrote.

She added those details to the final draft of the book, *From Alone to Aloha* (Cedar Forge Press, 2011). She now dances hula, plays ukulele and is active in her local Native Hawaiian community, which she visits often from her home in Poulsbo, Washington.

The book has touched the hearts of many readers. “*Mahalo nui* for this beautiful story,” wrote Kahanamoku family friend Earl Maikahikinapamaikala Tenn. “You have brought so much dignity and awareness of Aloha to your family.”

With adoption, foster care and abuse playing so prominently in Indian country, ICTMN found out more about how Sonia Lien discovered her Hawaiian heritage and the healing it brought her. This conversation has been excerpted and recast from an earlier interview.

How did you become disconnected from your Native Hawaiian roots?

I was only four when I became a ward of the court... Having lived in foster homes and group homes, I never knew the feeling of belonging to a loving family. I never thought about my Hawaiian roots.

In your book you describe how the discovery of who your father was began over lunch with a friend in February 2010. What happened?

I told her what I had heard from my mother: that my father was a popular and prominent Hawaiian and sheriff of Honolulu when I was born. My mother had said his name was Duke Kah—something. My friend’s partner, an avid surfer, became curious. He googled “Sheriff of Hawaii in 1935”; that was all it took for him to obtain the name “Duke Kahanamoku.” As it turns out, it was his brother (Olympic bronze medalist) Sam Kahanamoku who was on that ship and who had the affair with my mother and is my true birth father.

What did the Kahanamokus’ acceptance teach you about your family and culture, and what did you learn about yourself?

I have to give credence to the strength and character I inherited from my real father from Hawaii. The aloha that he and his family professed as their creed lived and thrived in me as I struggled in those early years. And it remains today, through the grace of God.

Source: <http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2012/01/22/from-neglect-to-healing-and-joy-coming-to-terms-with-a-fragmented-past-73734>