



# Dwayne Steele Inspires a Hawaiian Renaissance

Is it possible for an outsider to preserve a culture that is not his own?  
Dwayne Steele did just that when he partnered with locals to save a dying  
language and a culture he had come to love.

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Dwayne Steele was habitually generous—as his leadership of Hawaii-based Grace Pacific Corp. made plain. As the construction company’s CEO, he was not obsessed with squeezing out every last dollar of profit. On the contrary, as Grace Pacific Director Walter Dods said in Steele’s obituary in 2006, Steele “felt that whatever extra you had to pay to make everyone happy, you’d make it up in the long term.” He also gave employees a chance to step up, rewarding strong performances with an opportunity to take on additional responsibility, and compensating them for their efforts. That approach paid off; under Steele’s leadership, Grace Pacific grew from having 50 employees to 500, and its annual sales grew from \$8 million to \$135 million.

But Steele’s successes extend far beyond that balance sheet. Remarkably, many were accomplished after he retired—and in a culture that was not his own.

### An opportunity and an obstacle

A native of Kansas, Steele fell in love with a Hawaiian woman while studying at the University of Colorado, moved to Hawaii, and never left. One of his first friends in Hawaii was a blind guitarist, Johnny Almeda, who taught him to play the slack key guitar and sing traditional Hawaiian songs. That experience inspired an ongoing love of Hawaiian music and culture, and after Steele’s retirement from Grace Pacific in 1989, he devoted himself to those interests full time.

To his dismay, however, he quickly discovered that the Hawaiian language was in danger of being lost. Subsumed by English by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the language was no longer being passed down through generations. By the 1980s, in fact, native speakers of Hawaiian had all but disappeared, and a society that was once one of the most literate cultures in the world was at risk of losing this cherished asset.

Steele did not speak to Hawaiians in their language unless they spoke to him first. But when he was able to respond in kind, he won them over. “The fact that he’s a white guy speaking the language just blew them away.”

There were astonishingly few written materials available in Hawaiian; the University of Hawaii didn't even have Hawaiian-language textbooks for use in its language classes.

After realizing the depth of the crisis, Steele felt compelled to help preserve the Hawaiian language and culture he cared so deeply about. But his Midwestern roots meant he would always be an outsider—not an easy position in Hawaiian society, where white people can be mistrusted.

## Making inroads: establishing patterns of kindness and respect

Steele made several key choices that helped him gain credibility with the people he wanted to assist. First, he chose a partner: Oswald “Oz” Stender, a native Hawaiian whom Steele had met when they collaborated on a construction project in the 1960s, soon after he moved to Hawaii. After becoming close friends during that initial job, they continued their friendship and working relationship.



*Photo: Star Advertiser*

Steele also began to learn the Hawaiian language. Learning a language in retirement can be a difficult challenge, but Steele's commitment to mastering Hawaiian was genuine. He studied at the University of Hawaii and in the community until he was fluent. Even so, to show respect, he did not speak to Hawaiians in their language unless they spoke to him first. But when he was able to respond in kind, he won them over. “The fact that he's a white guy

speaking the language just blew them away,” said Stender. Steele's decades of living in Hawaii also gave him a cultural awareness and understanding of “how things are done around here” which helped him work effectively.

Finally, Steele gave humbly and looked for ways to empower others. He made quiet, sometimes anonymous, often unsolicited gifts. He sought out small groups and activists who were working to preserve elements of Hawaiian culture and gave them the resources they needed to accomplish their goals.

## The results?

Steele's endeavor to preserve Hawaiian culture and language was risky on several levels: in addition to being white and an outsider, Steele was among the first to take action to breathe life into a struggling Hawaiian culture. But as with business, Steele's signature approach reaped rewards.

For example, in 1988, he and Stender began supporting the Aha Punana Leo (APL) Hawaiian-language preschools, which had started in Kalihi five years earlier

to help revive the language among children, with computers, cash, and encouragement. At first, there were many difficulties. All the storybooks and teaching materials had to be created from scratch or translated into Hawaiian from English. It took several years of effort to amend state laws to allow Hawaiian to be used as the primary language of instruction, even in a private school (an exception that “real” languages were already permitted).

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Lastly, some parents were concerned that their children wouldn’t learn English properly and would be at a lifelong disadvantage. Steele took this concern seriously, and funded two different school models among the Ni’ihau community of Kaua’i to test the question. This experiment ultimately showed that students who were taught entirely in Hawaiian and those who began having some classes in English in the first grade had equally high levels of English fluency five years later due to cultural influences outside of school.

Almost 30 years after the launch of the first APL school in 1983, the number of children who speak fluent Hawaiian has increased by a factor of 50. There are 11 APL private schools throughout Hawaii. What’s more, there are K-12 Hawaiian-immersion schools within the public school system and stronger Hawaiian language classes across all the Hawaiian islands.

## Key Takeaways

- **Consider the cultural context:** Be sensitive to cultural norms and power dynamics.
- **Listen and involve:** Give the people you’re trying to help a voice and role.

Steele also helped launch a publishing effort to address the dearth of Hawaiian language books. This effort produced materials ranging from textbooks and dictionaries to storybooks containing traditional Hawaiian legends. In addition, the initiative trained typists and editors to be skilled in the language. Ultimately,

Steele’s work led to the creation of a publishing company and an established translator training ground. Steele also launched a program to digitize 100 Hawaiian language newspapers published during the 1800s and early 1900s, when Hawaiian language and culture were thriving—thereby creating an invaluable resource for scholars and others interested in Hawaii’s history and culture.

But the full extent of Steele’s impact is bigger than schools and publications. Today, Hawaiian language, culture, and history are in full bloom. To cite just one example, Hula, which was shunned in the 1840s, is now exploding, with more than

6,000 dance troupes worldwide. Hawaiians credit Steele with fueling much of the original momentum behind this reversal. While Steele's philanthropy was determinedly unpretentious, his generosity and standing in the community often convinced others to join in. The schools, the translation project, the newspaper digitization project, and the book publishing company all continue to thrive.

## The ultimate compliment

Steele would not have been comfortable with much praise and attention. But Dods paid Steele a compliment even he might have enjoyed. He said, of Steele, "He's the most Hawaiian man I've ever known in my life."

For an outsider, high praise, indeed.

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### SOURCES FOR THIS PROFILE INCLUDE:

- Bridgespan interview and correspondence with Oz Stender and Puakea Nogelmeier.
- Dan Nakaso, "Dwayne Steele, 71, Isle Philanthropist," *Honolulu Advertiser*, April 21, 2006.
- Thomas J. Tierney and Joel L. Fleishman, *Give Smart: Philanthropy That Gets Results*, (Public Affairs, 2011).