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## Sonoma woman honored for 'lifetime achievement' as hula sage



Come and dance! Betty Ann Bruno, bottom row powder blue shirt, and her 'Hula Mai sisters' put on their happy faces at the Sonoma Community Center. (Robbi Pengelly/Index-Tribune)

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Not far from Betty Ann Bruno's front door, nestled in a place of honor just beside her piano, there rests a handmade drum from Hawaii. The drum - called a Pahu, or pa'u - was crafted for Bruno by a master drum maker from the Aloha State, incorporating her ideas into what is part work of art, and part sacred ceremonial instrument.

"It's so magnificent, and all the symbols have powerful meanings," Bruno explains. "It took a while for him to make, and then, after I received it, I spoke with him and he told me that first I needed to name the drum. And he asked me to send him details of my Hawaiian genealogy, because, he said, 'I have made your drum, and I want to know who it is who is playing my drum.'"

That sense of lineage, of passing down a thing of value from one artist to another, from one Hawaiian to another, holds a meaning as powerful as any of the symbols on Bruno's drum. Once known primarily for her work on television as a news reporter for KTVU - where she appeared on the nightly news from 1971 to 1992 - the now-retired Bruno has since crafted another, even more revered reputation as a teacher of hula dancing. For nearly nine years, through a series of classes and performances all grouped under the name Hula Mai - it means "come and dance" - Bruno has trained, nurtured and encouraged hundreds of women, introducing her "hula mai sisters" to the art of the Hawaiian hula.

Earlier this month, on Oct. 3, in a ceremony held at the Freight and

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Salvage music hall in Berkeley, Bruno was given a lifetime achievement award as part of the Berkeley Hawaiian Music Festival. In bestowing the award, which now stands in the same room as Bruno's drum, acclaimed Hawaiian slack-key guitar master Patrick Landeza said, "Betty Ann Bruno is a pioneer. In the world of media and news, she was one of the first persons of color on T.V., as a reporter on Channel 2. Growing up and seeing her on television, every time I saw her I was proud. And now, as a teacher of the hula in Sonoma, she is amazing! Just amazing, carrying on the spirit of Aloha."

Sitting this morning on her tree-circled outdoor deck – where countless hula parties and dances have taken place – Bruno recalls the evening of the award with a an unexpected flood of emotion.

"I am very honored by it," she says, her eyes filling with tears, "because it's an acceptance, an acceptance of me by leaders in the Hawaiian community. It's an affirmation that I'm OK, that I'm part of the group. You'd think, with the attention I've received over the years for my work on television, that something like this might not be such a big deal to me, but it is. It's a big deal."

"And it's about time!" says Liz Quinn, one of Bruno's Hula Mai "sisters," who was among her teacher's very first students, having been dancing with her for almost seven years. "I'm the oldest coconut," laughs Quinn, referring to Bruno's favorite endearment for her students. ("When they've done something really good," Bruno says, "I call them a 'lovely bunch of coconuts.'")

Currently working three days a week at a variety of locations, Bruno estimates her current crop of dancers at about 35, all ranging in age. "I started teaching in 2009," she recalls, "beginning with a little one-weekend workshop at the teen center that turned into a six-week workshop at the Senior Center — and just grew from there. It all just sort of happened, and I've been on a little rocket ship every since."

According to Bruno, she first began studying the hula in her 20s, following a lifelong urge to connect with her Hawaiian heritage.

"I wanted to learn more about the meaning of my face," she says. "Who was I? What was my culture all about? My mother was part Hawaiian, but I grew up in a time when it wasn't cool to be ethnic, and my mother never wanted to talk about it. So I started learning the hula, as a way to connect to my roots, to my heritage."

Eventually, after starting a family, she was offered the opportunity to work on air at Channel 2, pursuing her other interests in politics and the news. Reluctantly, Bruno set aside the hula. It was only after retiring from the station that she was able to return to her first love.

Through Hula Mai, she also produces several hula performances and showcases every year, including an annual show in the Sonoma Plaza.

"We think of it as our gift of aloha to Sonoma," says Bruno.

Whenever possible, whether in a big show in the plaza or at a small retirement home showcase, Bruno dances, taking the stage alongside her Hula Mai sisters to demonstrate the graceful beauty of the hula.

"She's a beautiful dancer," says Quinn, "and she loves the hula so much. She started this because of her love for the hula, because she wanted to pass it on to all of us. And now we all love it as well. Hula reaches deep down into you. It's just so refreshing. I feel so wonderful after I've danced the hula for a few hours. Betty Ann often says, 'Hula makes you happy,' and it's true. Hula makes me very, very happy."

Bruno admits that she is not trained the way some hula masters are, essentially teaching herself how to teach.

"I feel humble about that," she says. "My position to all of these master

teachers, who’ve been steeped in this culture for years, is one of deep reverence and humility. They’ve been learning while I was out earning a living at Channel 2.”

Her students clearly don’t care.

“Betty Ann is a very patient teacher,” says Jill Powers, another of Bruno’s students. “She has a knack for making me feel incredibly confident. I don’t feel bad, even when I know I’m not doing too well at something. Betty Ann makes me feel I will get there if I just have fun and keep working.”

“I might not have the training that some have,” Bruno allows, “but I do the best I can. Hula is my life, now, and these women of Hula Mai – they truly are my sisters. I wake up in the morning, every Monday Wednesday, and Friday, thinking, ‘I’m so happy! I get to teach class today!’”

To learn more about Hula Mai and Betty Ann Bruno’s hula classes, visit [www.hulamai.org](http://www.hulamai.org)

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