



45 students are first to graduate from Kapolei school

By Pat Gee

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, May 17, 2010

Six years ago, husband and wife Dan and Judy White founded Island Pacific Academy in Kapolei as a mom-and-pop operation with plenty of hands-on nurturing. Now their first fledglings are leaving the nest.

Forty-five seniors are graduating Saturday, 14 of whom have been with IPA before the first building went up.

"I will always remember this first group," said Judy White, director of advancement. "They've paved the way because they've always been the senior class for six years, the oldest kids who set the tone, help create the school culture. I've seen them grow and mature," she said.

The Whites envisioned a college preparatory school that would teach values like "a generosity of spirit, the power of kindness, respect and trustworthiness," in addition to a core curriculum that embraced creative thinking and the arts, said Headmaster Dan White.

When Judy White first conducted student admissions interviews in February 2004, "I was admitting them to a school that was a dirt lot. I'm grateful that the families saw the vision we had."

IPA started with 200 students from pre-kindergarten through seventh grade. It now has 650 students through 12th grade, divided between two buildings.

"Any bigger and it destroys that intimacy," Dan White said. "Intimacy is a huge word for us."

His wife added, "We wanted to feel we knew every name of every student we passed in the hallway."

Said class valedictorian Elliott Chen, "This is a school we've made. We did what nobody had done before. It was fun, actually. We were able to create what we needed for ourselves."

In his graduation address, Chen wants to tell his classmates to "carry on the rest of their lives this way -- continue to be leaders and not let obstacles stand in their way."

Student body president Jonathan Davis said what he gained the most from IPA was "not being afraid to try something, of what you think, of speaking your mind. I've embraced the diversity, hearing other people's opinions."

Without the financial backing of a church or an endowment, launching the nonprofit school was considered a risky enterprise.

Most of the funding for the school's roughly \$9 million annual budget comes from tuition income, which is "a challenge because we don't charge as high a tuition as the town schools," Dan White said. The recession has made it tougher to generate the rest, about \$250,000, from an annual fundraiser, grants and gifts from parents and friends, he added.