



Lilian Ongelungel has started a storytelling series for Pacific Islanders called "Pacific Perspectives." Ongelungel, a Palauan-American artist, created the piece above as part of an art series commissioned by Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF LILIAN ONGELUNGEL

Bucking isolation

IF YOU GO

WHAT: "Pacific Perspectives: The Only Islander in the Room," members of Friends of UTOPIA PDX share stories and food

WHEN: 6-8 p.m. March 24

WHERE: High and Low Art Space and Gallery, 936 SE 34th St., Portland

COST: Free; all ages welcome

Share your story

If you are a Pacific Islander and are interested in sharing your story at Pacific Perspectives, contact Lilian Ongelungel through Islesnesia's Facebook page, [Facebook.com/islesnesia](https://www.facebook.com/islesnesia)

BY SARAH HANSELL
STAFF WRITER

When first-generation Samoan-American Justin Sipoloa went to Astor Elementary School in the early 1980s, he was one of the few brown faces in a sea of white ones. His parents were among the first to "set up shop" in St. Johns, and back then, there were few other Pacific Islanders in Portland.



JUSTIN SIPOLOA,
COMMUNITY ORGANIZER FOR PACIFIC ISLANDER YOUTHS AT APANO

At Tubman Elementary School, it was better. He had never seen so many students of color together under one roof.

"And I felt like, oh man, I just found a place where I could belong," he said.

But that was when gangs were ramping up, and Sipoloa didn't fit the bill. He was small for his age, hated getting in trouble and got good

grades. But he knew he had to fit in somewhere.

"I rebelled really bad," he said. "I refused to do schoolwork. My parents were constantly on me about grades. I couldn't care less about grades because it was not a place for me to be at."

At Jefferson High School, from where he graduated in 1995, he found friends that were like family – but still few other Pacific Islanders who could relate to his cultural experience.

At the time, being Samoan for him was just "a title, a label," a reason he had to keep answering questions from teachers

What is it like to be the only Pacific Islander in the room? A storytelling event will share perspectives of an experience advocates say many can relate to.

and students about where he was from and where Samoa was. No one seemed to quite understand his explanations until he mentioned Samoan WWF wrestlers.

"Going through the school system, I always felt ashamed of who I was, because I didn't see any other kids that looked like me," Sipoloa said. "There were kids that I thought looked like me, but they were Latinx. And so hearing them speak their language, it wasn't my language.

"It became very apparent that I was alone."

Sipoloa, who now organizes Pacific Islander youths and runs Islander student groups with the Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon, or APANO, isn't alone in feeling like the "only Islander in the room." Another Islander activist in Portland,

first-generation Palauan-American Lilian Ongelungel, has started a storytelling series for Islanders called "Pacific Perspectives."

The second session of "Pacific Perspectives" will be held March 24, hosted by Islesnesia and UTOPIA PDX. Islesnesia is an Islander arts and culture website run by Ongelungel and her sister, Sha Ongelungel, and UTOPIA PDX (United Territories of Pacific Islanders Alliance) is a local organization that works with queer and trans Pacific Islanders; Lilian Ongelungel is on the board.

At the session, UTOPIA PDX members and friends will share their stories. The theme is "The Only Islander in the Room."

The U.S. Census Bureau estimates there are about 15,000 Pacific Islanders in Oregon, and up to almost 30,000 people who self-identify as at least part Pacific Islander. But the Pacific Islander community can often be eclipsed by the "A" in API, or Asian/Pacific Islander, a designation that combines two distinct populations.

"When you look at API statistics as a whole, we're doing great out there," Lilian Ongelungel said. "But that's looking at it when the data is aggregated, when we're all lumped into one category."

When the data are viewed separately, there's a stark difference: 53 percent of Asians 25 and older in the U.S. have a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 17 percent of Pacific Islanders, according to the Census Bureau.

"That to me indicates that there's something missing in terms of culturally sensitive support at those stages in education," said Ongelungel.

See PACIFIC ISLANDER, page 10