

PACIFIC ISLANDER, from page 7

Ongelungel grew up speaking Palauan at home, and learned English and Spanish in public school. She soon transferred to an elite private school. The sudden lack of diversity, both in race and socioeconomic status, was a “culture shock,” she said, but helped give her the language to name and

navigate her experiences. She attended the University of Portland on an Army ROTC scholarship. As a college student and now in her career in nonprofit communication, Ongelungel has often been the only Pacific Islander in the room.

“But that isn’t to say there are no Pacific Islanders there,” Ongelungel said. “We are just

often very underrepresented in a lot of different areas – save for the NFL.”

This representation is sought in every stage of life – such as inclusion of Pacific American studies in schools and colleges; Islander role models; and dedicated spaces for Islanders, young and adult – to build community. And often the place where the opportunity for representation and community building starts is in school.

“The reason why I love my job is because I get to provide something that I didn’t have growing up,” Sipoloa said. “And being able to relate to the piece about feeling isolated, or feeling pressures from parents with grades and academics and going to college, or the pressures of taking care of younger siblings when you’re one of the oldest and your parents have to go back home for a funeral. That’s something that I’m able to relate to my students with.”

Ongelungel is a big believer of the saying, “If you don’t see it, it’s hard to become it,” and she hopes that “Pacific Perspectives”

will break through stereotypes of Pacific Islanders as dancers, entertainers and athletes and highlight a slice of the richness and diversity in the Islander community. She hopes that folks who are hearing stories like theirs for the first time will “walk away with a greater sense of how to uplift others, not just Pacific Islanders, but other people who have experienced being the only person who identifies with this particular identifier in the room.”

“With this storytelling series and this particular theme, I really wanted to uplift and give a platform to those Pacific Islanders who also have that experience,” Ongelungel said. “Who’ve been the only educators who are Pacific Islanders in the room, the people who have been the only quality assurance officer in the room who are Pacific Islanders, to the people who have been the only commissioned military officers who are Pacific Islanders in the room.”

The grouping together of API not only generalizes the narrative of a huge group of people but can also have tangible effects on programming and funding. When funding is granted to APIs, Pacific Islanders are often left out of services and programs that serve the Asian community, said Manu’malo Ala’ilima, a Samoan-American activist and founder of UTOPIA PDX.

“I think having Asian-Pacific Islander as a grouping is dangerous and does a huge disservice for Pacific Islanders because we’re often overshadowed,” Ala’ilima said. “So we basically have to carve out sacred space for ourselves.”

UTOPIA PDX is one example of what that sacred space can look like. According to its mission statement, UTOPIA PDX “provides sacred spaces to strengthen the minds and bodies of Queer and Trans Pacific Islanders (QTPIs) through community organizing, political engagement, and cultural stewardship.”

About a year old, UTOPIA PDX has, among other things, been active in multiple Pride celebrations, held many workshops at different events for Pacific Islanders, done extensive work with APANO, and visited the MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility to

meet with incarcerated QTPI youths.

As a sacred space, Ala’ilima wants UTOPIA PDX to become a place where QTPIs who are no longer welcome in their own families, communities or churches can celebrate and be supported through hallmarks in their lives such as naming ceremonies and weddings – even through the loss of loved ones.

“One type of issue we would like to focus on is developing a rite of passage for QTPIs, because many who have been shunned or kicked out of their homes, and/or villages, if they came straight from the islands,” Ala’ilima said. “Really just losing their family or losing their village or if they were part of a church, because of coming out and being who they are.”


In Samoa, a nation in Polynesia, same-sex sexual acts are illegal and punishable by up to seven years in prison. Although there are many parts of the Pacific Islands that have progressive outlooks and laws in terms of LGBTQ+ rights, seven nations of the Pacific Islands still criminalize homosexual acts, according to the International LGBTI Association.

“We have a very colonized influence that still almost handcuffs us or suffocates us and limits us to these binary systems, where I feel we’re so much more,” Ala’ilima said. “There’s so much community there.”

As indigenous people, Ala’ilima stresses the importance for Pacific Islanders and QTPIs to find their own language to define themselves, rather than use the language of those who have colonized them.

“There are different types of identities that we haven’t even attempted to scratch the surface with because we’re stuck in this mindset that we have to look at people in these really oppressive societal constructs,” Ala’ilima said. “So that’s something that UTOPIA is committed to deconstructing, and that includes trying to help find the language that makes the best sense to us to describe ourselves.”

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