



Palm trees wave on Molokai's gentler western shore where many visitors to the island find lodging.



A tourist arrives at Kalaupapa on a mule. Visitors may walk, ride a mule or fly to the isolated peninsula where at least 8,000 people suffering from leprosy were quarantined.



Siloama, a Congregational church organized in 1866 by 35 leprosy patients quarantined at Kalaupapa.



Staff photo by Kathy Aney
Mother Marianne Cope came to Molokai's Kalaupapa to care for patients who had been banished to the remote peninsula. The German-born nun was eventually beatified as a saint for her work.



Staff photo by Kathy Aney
Father Damien was a Roman Catholic priest from Belgium who cared for the patients at Kalaupapa. He eventually contracted leprosy himself and died at age 49 of the disease.



The Kalaupapa leper colony, now a National Historic Park, is fringed with hundreds of graves. Thousands of others are buried in two fields near the community.

KALAUAPAPA: 'This was a happy place'

Continued from 1C

"She did not fear the disease," Lau said. "She was prudent about infection control, but she hugged the girls. She dressed their dressings. By faith, she believed none of the sisters would get the disease and none of them did."

The nuns taught the girls confidence and schooled them in making lace, singing and dancing.

"The sisters made this a cheerful place," Lau said.

Back on the bus, Schonely drove past "the world headquarters of Damien Tours," otherwise known as Auntie Gloria's house.

"She's probably taking a nap in there right now," Schonely quipped.

His obvious affection is contagious. He said "the queen of Kalaupapa" serves as president of the local Lion's Club and has a thing for fancy cars. A yellow 1968 Mustang sits under a tarp in Aunt Gloria's garage. Her husband Richard, who died in 2008, once toiled around town in a Model T when he wasn't driving the tour bus.

The presence of former residents lingers, Schonely said. He finds hope and awe in the way the patients found joy in their dire circumstances. They fell in love and married. They danced. They fished. Despite not being able to travel or raise children, they found joy.

"This was a happy place," he said.

During the lunch stop, Schonely pulled out his ukulele and sang a song written by a leprosy patient. The lyrics spoke of the man's beautiful home — Kalaupapa.

One of the most recent patients to die was Uncle Pali a year ago. Next to the volleyball net sits his dilapidated Volkswagen. In the doorway of the van, he once stood and refereed volleyball games.

In his later years, Schonely said, "he blew his whistle at random. No one's had the heart to remove the van."

The National Park Service, which maintains the settlement, considers the opinions of the remaining patients at every turn. The Kalaupapa advisory commission created by the Hawaii Legislature includes seven seats reserved for patients.

"Our mission at Kalaupapa is to provide a well-maintained settlement for the remaining patients as long as they choose to live here," said Erika Stein Espaniola, NPS superintendent at Kalaupapa.

The fate of Kalaupapa, once the last patient dies, is yet to be decided. The National Park Service is considering four options for the future ranging from doing nothing to unrestricted access. The decision will likely fall somewhere in between, Espaniola said. The public and the remaining patients, who don't want their story to die with them, are weighing in.

"What we've heard loud and clear from patients and the public is that they want to see Kalaupapa retain its essence," she said. "They want to preserve Kalaupapa and interpret for education and inspiration for present and future generations."

Our tour came to an end with the squeak of the bus brakes. Schonely hugged us exuberantly after the tour and we hiked back up the trail.

I will remember this day for a long time, I thought as I sucked wind, and not just because of my aching calf muscles. The patients of Kalaupapa had lodged in my heart as proof that humans in the most dire of straits can overcome with grace and joy.

Contact Kathy Aney at kaney@eastoregonian.com or call 541-966-0810.



Rick Schonely, son of Trail Blazers broadcaster Bill Schonely, leads tours at Kalaupapa and often pulls out his ukulele to perform a song or two.



A wild pig roams near Kalaupapa, an isolated peninsula on Hawaii's island of Molokai.



A dilapidated van sits next to the Kalaupapa volleyball court in tribute to a patient who died recently. The man liked to stand in the door of the van and officiate volleyball games from that slightly elevated perch. The remaining patients couldn't bear to move the vehicle.



Tour guide Rick Schonely clowns as he waits for his group to board the bus for the next stop on the several-hour tour of the historic leper colony.



Eric Dean, of Portland, drops a postcard in the mail slot at the Kalaupapa Post Office. The community of leprosy patients has churches, fire department, police, library, bar, bookstore and other amenities.



A cardinal perches along the trail to Kalaupapa, an isolated peninsula on Hawaii's island of Molokai.