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TALKING STORY IN ASIAN AMERICA

■ Polo



How Tongan America speaks to us

Mele Kavapalu let loose a Tongan trill so strong that it took mothers' attention from their squirmy kids, it took uncles from their conversations among each other. From corner to corner in our crowded church basement, eyes turned to Mele's elegant hands and arms, to hips rolling as sure and steady as that deep blue sea between here and her family's island home. Mele's dignified mother and her lovely sisters, tears streaming, swayed with her. And our achy little earth moved with them all. So strong these women are.

Mele's traditional dance with her family, inside their house of God, before all those folks gathered on this River City summer Saturday evening — says it all. Our Pacific islanders took quiet, though enormous pride in this daughter's star-spangled graduation from Madison High School. And the crown she earned to become a princess on the 2017 Rose Festival Court.

Here's some of what got her voted there. Over the last year, Mele was Madison's student body co-president. A first in that Portland school's history. She's also known for standing tall as Madison's varsity women's volleyball team captain. Every year since arriving, Mele's been standing out on the basketball court, in track and field competitions. Ask, and her classmates will tell you all about Mele's inspiring presence in sports and in packed classrooms.

Characteristic of her stubborn commitment to both her proud islander community and to America's robust mainstream, Mele strums irresistible ukulele at Pacific islander backyard lu'aus and plays a mean trombone in her high school's symphonic band. And of course, she does each equally well. Her ethno-cultural crossover ukulele singalongs on otherwise long boring school bus rides, are legend.

How big and brave, how fun

On this evening, inside the United Methodist Church's Lents Tongan Fellowship, Rose Festival 2017 Queen Michaela Canete (Filipina American representing Century High School) and princess Biftu Amin (Ethiopian American representing Cleveland High School) joined princess Mele for an impromptu shot at the Jackson 5's 1970 soul and



Likely the hearts of every hardworking father and uncle and grandpa sitting quietly with Madam Kavapalu's words, surely swelled with pride for every tough and tender daughter in that humble church basement.

pop hit "I Want You Back." The crowd loved them.

Banquet tables ran wall to wall in the church's community room. Each heaped high with juicy, whole, spit-roasted pig, with all kinds of blessed sea life, a variety of breads, dumplings, and puddings made of their beloved coconut, all that highlighted by heaps of Pacific island and Pacific Northwest fruits. Splendid feast notwithstanding, everyone hushed when Mele's regal mom, Madam Kato Kavapalu backed by sisters Helen and Milika, humbly presented her family's successes and sorrows, and their gratitude, to their church and community elders.

Missing from the celebration was husband and father, Ofa Kavapalu. Mr. Kavapalu passed away from their lives nine years ago, in July also — but in his absence, the hearts of every hardworking father and uncle and grandpa sitting quietly with Madam Kavapalu's words, surely swelled with pride for every tough and tender daughter in that humble church basement. And in our blessed lives. Outside Lents Tongan Fellowship, a cooling evening breeze was bringing an end to another Oregon summer

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