

Showdown at the palace

Tempers flare as protestors challenge statehood celebrators at the seat of the Hawaiian monarchy



By Sterling Kini Wang
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Emotions ran high at 'Iolani Palace on Aug. 18, when a group of about 50 Native Hawaiians confronted participants in an Admission Day celebration led by state Sen. Sam Slom, who also introduced an unsuccessful bill during this year's legislative session to remove the anniversary of statehood as a state holiday, claiming that it no is longer being properly celebrated because of political controversy.

The protestors at the palace said it was inappropriate and disrespectful to hold the statehood celebration on the very spot where the Hawaiian kingdom was overthrown with the help of U.S. marines in 1893. But Slom, a Republican who represents East Honolulu and is also the president of the advocacy group Small Business Hawai'i, said the palace was appropriate for the event because it was the site of the signing of the proclamation that admitted Hawai'i into the Union on Aug. 21, 1959.

Some of the approximately 30 participants in the celebration brought American flags and wore patriotic clothes. State Rep. Barbara Marumoto dressed up as the Statue of Liberty.

Slom dismissed the protestors' claims that the event was located at the palace to provoke Native Hawaiians. "We didn't want any disrespect for anybody," he said. "This event was

not put together as a political event; it was put together as a historical event."

Protestor Ikaika Hussey, however, said that having the event at the palace "was not an innocuous decision," noting that among the participants were H. William Burgess, his wife, Sandra, and Ken Conklin, all of whom are vocal opponents of government programs that benefit only Native Hawaiians, and support or are directly involved with a lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of OHA and the Department of Hawaiian Homelands.

"I do think that they were trying to upset Hawaiians," Hussey said. "I think they were also trying to turn the palace into simply a museum, as opposed to a living symbol of Hawaiian nationalism. And our intent here was to defend that Hawaiian symbol."

He added, "It's true the statehood event did happen here in 1959, but hopefully we've grown since then and realize that Hawai'i's relationship with the United States is fraught with error, and we need to re-evaluate that."

About an hour prior to the start of the event, protestors began to set up a sound system, Hawaiian flags and banners on a grassy area fronting the palace. As people began to arrive, the protestors took turns on the microphone to explain the history of the overthrow and demand

that the celebration be moved to the grounds of the state Capitol. The confrontation caused members of the Kalani High School marching band, which had been invited to play for the celebration, to leave before playing a single note, with some of the students and their accompanying adults looking visibly disturbed by the encounter.

After the band left, the situation escalated, with protestors and event participants engaging in heated, face-to-face exchanges. The two groups eventually separated themselves after about an hour and a half, and the day ended without any injuries or arrests.

Celebration participant Laura Brown said she was disappointed with the behavior of the protestors. "[America] gives them the right to be able to assemble and the right to free speech, but they misuse it to be hateful to other people," she said. "It's almost exclusionary, like they're the only ones allowed to be here. And they've been miseducated about Hawai'i's history."

Peter Judkins, who came to Hawai'i three years ago from Virginia, was walking from the state library when he saw the "hoopla" and wanted to see what was going on. "What I saw was some people misrepresenting the American people by disrespecting the Hawaiians here on this land, Hawaiian land, and I wanted to get involved," he said.

Left: State Sen. Sam Slom and Native Hawaiian attorney Dexter Kaiama were among the Admission Day celebrators and protestors who faced off. Below, from top: Ken Conklin and Terri Keko'olani; Trisha Kēhaulani Watson and H. William Burgess; and Malia Zimmerman and Mehana Kaiama. - Photos: Sterling Kini Wong

