



Every Thursday morning at 10 a.m., several women, all in matching purple T-shirts and skirts, file into the community room at Light of Life Lutheran Church in Aloha for a weekly hula class.

But to them, this is more than a dance class. The members of the class are all **kupunas** – the Hawaiian word for elders – and they meet once a week for a hula class for those 55 and older.

The class is run by **Hula Hālau Ohana Holo'oko'a**. In Hawaiian, this means “the school of hula where everyone is family.” The kupunas embrace this idea wholeheartedly.

“We actually call each other our sisters,” said Donna Fowler, 65, of Aloha.

She’s taken the class for five years, and the women she has met along the way are especially interesting.

Lisa Chang, who heads the hula school, said she likes all her classes, but her kupuna class is special.

They go out of their way to spend time with each other outside of class: Every month, the members of the class get together for a potluck lunch.

The women’s bond is evident during class. The women laugh as they chat with each other, and smiles are wide and plentiful. Sometimes they pause the pleasant chatter to pray for a family member of one of the women, and the care and tenderness in the room is tangible.

“Some people don’t get what the aloha spirit means,” Chang said. “But they (the kupunas) are able to travel and go there (to Hawaii) every year, so they really understand what that aloha spirit is, and they exude it. We’re really fortunate to have them all. Any new person – they bring them on in; make them feel really welcome.”

Mary Jane Bagwell, 67, has experienced this first-hand. She comes up to Aloha from Salem every week for the class.

“This is the most gracious group of women,” she said. “They even let you dance if you don’t know what you’re doing. They embrace you.”

Apart from friendships, the kupunas love the art of hula.

“I think it’s a wonderful way to express creativity with your hands and your body,” Fowler said.

After spending most of their lives expressing themselves by speaking and writing, Fowler is grateful for the chance to express herself with hula.

Hula has become more than a weekly dance class to the women.

“I thought I would take a dance lesson every week,” Bagwell said. “But it starts encompassing everything you do. It’s wonderful.”

Now, the hula music pervades Bagwell’s dreams, she said.

Fowler said the spirit of Aloha holds them together.

“I think we are kinder and gentler women,” she said.

-- Anna Marum