

Halau Hula

By ReadWorks



As the bright sun began to stream through her window, Maya lazily rubbed her eyes and wondered what day it was. She had been in a deep, deep sleep, dreaming about swimming in a vast pool of chocolate ice cream. She licked her lips, remembering what bliss it had been to have a constant supply of her favorite dessert. All of a sudden, she realized it was Monday, and she was late for dance practice. She whipped out of bed, hastily pulled on a long, white dress, and rushed out the door.

Five minutes later, she found the rest of her class sitting underneath a cluster of palm trees in the backyard of her *halau hula*, a school that teaches hula dance, the traditional dance form of Hawaii. Her *kumu hula*, or hula teacher, stood impatiently in front of the sitting students who were all fanning themselves in the humid, Hawaiian heat. The *kumu hula* was a huge proponent of punctuality. It was just one of her many rules, all of which formed the *kapu*—a set of regulations that all her students must obey. Traditionally, in *halau hulas*, the obedience of such rules would mean that dancers would receive blessings from the gods that could increase their talent in performing the hula. Maya's *kumu hula* also had high standards of personal cleanliness and restricted the eating of most sugar, including sugarcane, a popular snack in Hawaii. This was the hardest rule for Maya to follow. She thought back to her dream of ice cream while she quietly sat amongst the other students, hoping that *kumu hula* wouldn't punish her for being late.

"All right, well now that we're all here..." the *kumu hula* started, while giving Maya a knowing look. "Tomorrow we start our preparations for the graduation ceremony."

The girls and boys looked at one another in excitement—they had been training for months in order to graduate and become professional hula dancers. They would start off as *olapa*, meaning agile ones. They are given many dancing roles. When they had danced long enough

and gained enough experience, they would become a part of the *ho'oppa*, meaning steadfast ones. The *ho'oppa* typically sit on the ground and play heavier instruments while the *olapa* dance.

“That means that you all must stay in the *halau* unless you have a very good reason to leave. We'll only practice once a day in order to give your bodies rest,” the *kumu hula* told her students.

Maya and her friends all let out a sigh of relief. They had been practicing more than usual in order to prepare for their big graduation performance. After the *kumu hula* finished explaining the schedule for the next week, the girls and boys got up to eat breakfast. They walked to the kitchen where fresh fruits were already scattered across the table. Maya picked up a mango and a knife and began to cut.

As she passed around dripping mango slices to her friends, they shared their excitement for graduation.

“I can't wait to see my family!” a boy named Keanu said. Everyone nodded their heads in agreement. It had been a month since everyone had seen their family and friends. Even though they loved living in the *halau*, it was sort of like a boarding school in the sense that they could not leave whenever they wanted to. They couldn't wait to share the celebration with their friends.

A week passed, and it was finally the night before graduation. They spent the evening in dress rehearsal in order to make sure the performance would go smoothly. Both the girls and boys wore *lei* around their heads they had each made for themselves out of native plants found near their *halau*. They strapped *kupe'e* around their ankles and wrists—bracelets made of whale teeth and bone that made a light percussion sound as they moved. Both girls and boys wore skirts, or *pa'u*, made out of stripped bark from a hibiscus tree, but the girls' skirts were painted with beautiful designs.

After they finished rehearsal, the entire group walked to the beach nearby and into the water as a ceremonial bathing ritual. “The water is meant to purify you before your performance tomorrow,” the *kumu hula* told them as she walked into the white waves, too. When they returned to the *halau*, the *kumu hula* sprinkled each of their faces with holy water. Their *kumu hula* took pride in maintaining the traditional rituals her mother and grandmother had passed on to her—she wanted to preserve the art of hula through the passing generations. She hoped that her own daughter, who was graduating with Maya, would continue the traditions when she reached a certain age.

The students rested a bit before sitting down to eat with family and friends. After everyone hugged and kissed each other, rejoicing in their reunion, the *kumu hula* explained the purpose of the feast.

“Now, we partake in the ‘*ailolo*’ feast that marks the end of my students’ training. After this meal, they will officially be hula dancers,” she said as a pig was brought to the large table which is a traditional part of the feast. Maya looked around the table at all her friends’ smiling faces. She was so relieved she had made it so far in her training, but was nervous to start her career as a professional dancer as well.

Once they finished the meal, the students went to prepare for the performance and donned their traditional hula costumes. They lined up, ready to perform for an audience for the first time ever. Maya looked out into the audience and could see the smiling faces of her mom, dad, and little brother. She felt the soft grass between her toes, and thanked the gods for letting them be there to see her dance. The music began, and she stepped out, finally, as a hula dancer.