

Reconnecting Hearts

By

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Ashley Torres and Oscar Gomez-Hernandez were surprised to be selected as this year's honorees for Hawaii's National Reunification Month celebration. Held at the Kohala Village Hub and Inn on the Island of Hawaii, the celebration was the first in-person gathering of its kind in over two years. The joy and gratitude exuding from all the participants was as intoxicating as the beauty of the Inn's rural Hawaiian landscape.

Tables decorated with colorful paper horse pinatas and pictures of the Hernandez-Torres family greeted the day's guests. On stage, beneath a large projected picture of Ashley, Oscar, and their five young children -- Izel, Oscar Jr., Catalina, Alexander, and Camila -- another table was covered with fragrant leis, two framed Governor's Proclamations, and gifts for the children. Extended family members, friends, Child Welfare Services (CWS) employees, members of the Judiciary, and other supportive agency staff were all in attendance. *Reconnecting Hearts* was the day's theme, and while that theme spoke to the wonderful healing of the Hernandez-Torres family, it also captured an essential ingredient in Ashley's healing process. Besides her unshakable love for her children, it was the professionals' and supporter's heartfelt belief in her that deeply touched her and gave her the confidence she needed to get clean and sober. Without their steady, genuine caring, she shared, the demands of the recovery and reunification process would have been overpowering.

That caring was also present in the collaborative effort that made the celebration possible. The University of Hawaii (UH) School of Law and EPIC `Ohana Inc., provided a delicious and abundant lunch. Representatives from DHS, EPIC, the Judiciary's Court Improvement Program, the UH School of Law, Catholic Charities, Partners in Development Foundation, and Family Programs Hawaii all participated on a Planning Committee. The celebration, itself, consisted of: maternal uncle, the Reverend Matthew Torres, opening the ceremony with a pule or prayer; the showing of the Honorable Judge Wendy DeWeese's congratulatory video; CWS Section Administrator, Leahne Toscano, CWS Branch Administrator, Elladine Olevao, and Social Worker, Nancy Radtke, each giving very personal and moving tributes; Nicole Trost from Catholic Charities, conveying a message of support from the children's resource caregivers; Ashley expressing her and Oscar's gratitude for everyone's support and the day's amazing celebration; and maternal aunt, Laura Torres, ending with a closing talk and pule.

Throughout, the day was full of inspiration and tender moments. Oscar and Ashley heard and saw how much their success meant to everyone, especially their very playful and affectionate children. Family and friends could see the wide range of support the family received from a variety of professionals. The professionals could see the loving support the family had from within their own community. Everyone was rejuvenated by the reminder that, with effort, successful reunifications of families do happen when everyone pitches in and works together.

Seeing the family eating at their table, the children playing with their new toys, Oscar Jr. spontaneously hugging his dad, and Catalina clinging to her mom's dress – all were moments of normal family life made all the more precious by the hard work that led to them. From early on, Ashley and Oscar were determined to save their family; their supporters were determined to give them their best shot. Together, those clear intentions helped to reconnect the hearts of *this* family and create a bond that is now vibrant and strong. It's an accomplishment that brought joy to everyone present, and whose recognition was made possible by our National Reunification Month celebration.

