

## From Punana Leo o Hilo to Oxford

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By PETER SUR, Tribune-Herald staff writer



For anybody who has questioned the value of a Hawaiian immersion education, consider the case of 'Oiwi Parker Jones.

As members of Protect Kaho'olawe Ohana, his activist parents met in a courtroom following a protest.

Raised by his mother in Hilo, he entered the first class of Punana Leo o Hilo in 1985, and stayed with the program until he was 15.

Now 30, Parker Jones is a junior faculty member at England's University of Oxford, where he earned his PhD.,

and he was recently granted a prestigious \$50,000 Mellon-Hawaii postdoctoral fellowship in linguistics.

He joins a select group of scholars to receive the fellowship, which this year includes postdoctoral fellow Renee Pualani Louis, and doctoral fellows Larry Kimura and Kekuewa Kikilo. Kimura and Kikilo earned \$40,000 for the fellowship period, which runs from September through June 2012.

On a two-week stay in his hometown, the first since 2009, Parker Jones reflected on his work as a research fellow at Oxford. He works in the field of computational linguistics, which involves using computers to understand Hawaiian.

"If you want to make up new words, are those words written consistently?" Parker Jones asked. His work is useful for those scholars on the Hawaiian Lexicon Committee, which is tasked with creating new Hawaiian words to bring the language into the 21st century.

His other specialty involves running brain scans on bilingual people to explore what happens as they switch between languages.

For Parker Jones, who grew up speaking Hawaiian, earned advanced degrees in English, and who is now conversant in German, it's a natural fit.

Being bilingual has its advantages, Parker Jones said. "It helps you know who you are and where you came from. That's important, I think." Also, "It's good to be bilingual if you can. While growing up, a lot of people thought if we'd be good in Hawaiian, we'd be bad at English."

Parker Jones stayed with Punana Leo until he moved to Utah, where he graduated from high school in 1999. He enrolled at Colorado College, and in the summer of 2000 took a linguistics course at the University of Hawaii at Hilo.

"I didn't know much about linguistics" at the time, he said. But the course helped Parker Jones unite what he called "a double life" as a Hawaiian speaker and as an academic.

"It seemed like a way that I could bring the two parts of my life together," he said. "I would have something to offer as a linguist."

So, in 2003 he applied for the best graduate program he could find, at the University of Oxford. He received top honors for his master's thesis in 2005 regarding the stress patterns of 'olelo Hawai'i, the Hawaiian language, and stayed at Oxford to earn a doctorate in linguistics.

He wrote his dissertation on the phonology, or sound patterns, and morphology, or word structures, of the Hawaiian language, including the relationships between the two.

The research "makes substantial new contributions to our understanding of the structure of the Hawaiian language," said Oxford professor John Coleman, in a statement. "The fellowship will provide him with much-needed time to publish his work more publicly, either as a monograph or as a series of journal articles. Either way, it is excellent news for his career and will be a wonderful addition to the literature on Hawaiian."

Parker Jones has published academic studies on a number of topics, including loanwords in Hawaiian -- foreign concepts turned into Hawaiian words -- and predicting the use of the passive tense in the Maori language.

At least one other part-Hawaiian Big Islander is also enrolled at Oxford -- La'akea Yoshida, a 2010 graduate of UH-Hilo from Ka'u now studying classical Greek and Roman history.

Parker Jones likes living in the United Kingdom, but he'd also like to be involved in the Hawaiian community. For him, "It's up to me to give back," but it also depends on possible job openings.

His unique background and cutting-edge research caught the eye of a distinguished panel of scholars and Hawaiian elders that was charged with naming Mellon-Hawaii doctoral and post-doctoral fellowships, which give promising Hawaiian scholars the opportunity to finish their dissertations or to publish original research.

One member of the panel, Hawaiian Volcano Observatory scientist-in-charge Jim Kauahikaua, said there were about 18 applications reviewed this year, a relatively high number.

"It's sort of neat that he's come up from the Punana Leo, then turned up into a linguistics expert with incredible credentials in a very new field," Kauahikaua said.