

## Tina Tamai – Personal Story

**Tina Tamai** is a networker and community organizer dedicated to transforming food systems to achieve food justice and health equity for each and every person in Hawaii. Using health education theories, she organized a coalition of community food systems leaders from key communities across the state of Hawaii and developed a “network of networks” theory of change to rebuild local food systems to increase food access and healthy eating in disadvantaged communities. She then worked to transition the coalition of volunteers into a rising, highly regarded sustainable organization with 501c3 status. Tina is proud to now step back with confidence that The Hawaii Good Food Alliance (HGFA)(<https://hawaiigoodfoodalliance.org/>) is sustainable and positioned to continue the mission of food justice and health equity in the future.

Tina’s journey began (around 2006) at the beginning of the obesity epidemic while working at the Hawaii Department of Health as a program manager responsible for developing the USDA SNAP-Ed program in Hawaii to address nutrition behavior and obesity prevention among SNAP eligible populations. As research regarding obesity prevention practices was scarce at that time, Tina drew from her public health education training to create an integrated multi-prong community education approach involving organizing local leaders to influence eating behavior. She relied upon the basic tenet/belief that community grassroots leaders know best how to reach and influence community members and that *they are the ones* that should inform and direct strategies to effect change among community members. Tina sought their wisdom and purposefully followed their lead and direction to design strategies and opportunities to move change in the community, ignoring formulated templates. She piloted the approach in the community of Kalihi (a 3-mile area outside of downtown Honolulu comprised of over 15 different immigrant Pacific Islander ethnicities) which ultimately evolved into a successful and currently thriving cultural food hub led by Kokua Kalihi Valley Comprehensive Family Services community health center (<https://www.kkv.net/>) which encourages healthy eating by honoring and respecting indigenous culture.

Tina then expanded the approach to the Big Island and found Big Island leaders implementing a model entirely different from the Kalihi pilot. Big Island leaders used their local food bank trucking system which delivered canned goods to pantry sites throughout the island to aggregate produce from farmers on the way back to develop CSA fresh produce boxes which were distributed back to pantry sites and provided to community members at a discount or use of SNAP benefits.

As Tina reached out to more communities, she soon found herself convening a statewide collaborative of community food systems leaders from all islands in the state. In the process, Tina learned that each community was unique and developed solutions to food access differently depending on their community, capacity and resources. She also began to understand that healthy food consumption was not just about individual eating behavior but about a complex intertwined system of multiple sectors and issues (from agriculture, economic development, land and water rights to culture, community, individual emotion and belief) that ultimately dictates how and what a person eats. And, in order to effect change, all of these factors needed to be addressed simultaneously in a dynamic manner. As a result, Tina began to rethink her approach and developed a new theory of change: supporting leaders to network food systems specific for

their communities while networking them across the state to have greater voice and standing to influence and change the dynamic intertwined complexities of food systems and access at the macro level. Over time, she synthesized and labeled this theory of change as the “network of networks” model. Realizing the enormity of the “network of networks” model and the need for greater expertise and support, Tina formed a task force group of leaders from agriculture, food banking, and community to help lead the coalition.

It was at this juncture in 2016 that Tina decided to retire. To her surprise, the coalition of leaders overwhelmingly wanted to stay organized and continue networking. For developing this networking model, Tina was accepted as a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Culture of Health Leader Fellow. That opportunity allowed Tina to continue organizing and coordinating the coalition with greater effectiveness and credibility and further evolve the coalition to become what is officially known as the Hawaii Good Food Alliance (HGFA). She guided the members to define their core values, declare their mission and vision, and clearly articulate their vision and values in a case-making document. That clarity enabled HGFA members to move boldly and apply for 501c3 status. This attracted the attention of the Harry and Jeannette Weinberg Foundation and an award of a \$750,000 capacity building grant that enabled the volunteer organization to become an official non-profit with an executive director and staffing.

Tina understood the importance of buy-in in order for members to invest their free time pursuing initiatives to change the greater systems. Rather than the traditional strategic planning method, she conducted discussions and one-on-one conversations to bubble up and surface the areas of most concern and interest that members might commit time and energy to further. Four areas of interest emerged which HGFA now funds and pursues as its key initiatives: 1) Supporting establishment of small farmer food hubs statewide to increase markets which include supporting farmer’s markets, WIC programs, and local sourcing to hospital institutions, 2) Developing an innovative evaluation rubric which reflects food’s impact as a whole ecosystem on society, community as well as the individual, 3) Integrating food as the foundation of health (“Food As Medicine”) in community health care systems as well as traditional institutional hospital/healthcare and insurance systems, and 4) Establishing a Good Food Fund to sustain HGFA to support intentionality in furthering the mission of food justice and health equity while providing capital for community-based food enterprises.

Having developed a pilot project into a sustainable organization structure operating using a shared leadership framework, HGFA is now sought by funders and other sectors in Hawaii to advance work in food – food justice, food resiliency and health equity. Tina is currently working to transition authority and leadership to younger members to assure sustainability and continuity of efforts to transform food systems to be just and equitable for everyone in Hawaii.

[See full story published in:](#) Svedlin, Lina, *Creating Culture Through Health Leadership*, Interdisciplinary Community-Engaged Research for Health Series, Volume 2, Chapter 4: “Network Strategies and Cross-Collaboration to Strengthen Community Food Systems” – Tina Tamai, University of Cincinnati Press, 2020.

Meter, Ken, *Building Community Food Webs*, Chapter 3: Invoking Traditional Wisdom to Recover From Plantation Agriculture, Island Press – Washington/Covelo, 2021.