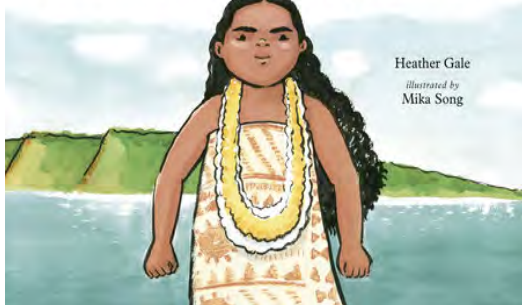


HO'ONANI HULA WARRIOR



Ho'onani: Hula Warrior

Written by Heather Gale

Illustrated by Mika Song

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This book transports readers to the islands in Hawai'i. When a child named Ho'onani does not see herself as either wahine (girl) or kāne (boy), but more like in-between the two societal gender norms, she feels content with herself. When she finds out that her school will be putting on a performance of her cultural and traditional heritage, she longs to be a part of it.

The only problem is that it is a traditional kāne hula chant. Not only does she want to be a part of it, but she also has a burning passion and desire to lead the all-male cast. In response to her desire, she auditions for the role. She is strong, sure, and steady. Ho'onani pursues her calling, she does not quit and knows she can earn this position. She continually practices memorizing every emotion and history that this dance holds for her community, her warriors, and Hawai'i's history. Ho'onani receives the position, though when the time comes to announce the good news to her family, not everyone is accepting. Her Kumu (teacher) respectfully warns her that some might not appreciate a wahine leading a kāne chant. Nevertheless, Ho'onani is determined and has the self-awareness that she is in the middle of wahine and kāne, which she states does not make her less wahine. On the day of her big performance, Ho'onani is strong, sure, and steady; she is nervous that people will perceive her as not kāne enough and protest. Arriving on the stage, feet stomping to the beat of the ipu hula (like modern-day drums) and the clacks of the kāla'au (sticks), Ho'onani stomps across the stage, followed by her warriors. Facing the crowd, Ho'onani feels the desire she is yearning for. Her voice thunders through the audience, captivating everyone, and she knows where she belongs. Ho'onani finds her place – “not as a wahine, not as a kāne, but as a hula warrior.”

This story is based on the real person Ho'onani Kamai who was born and raised on O'ahu, loved music, and played the ukulele. This picture book is authentic and based on the documentary *A Place in the Middle* (<https://aplaceinthemiddle.org/>), which describes ancient Hawaiian culture in which the mähū, people who embraced both feminine and masculine traits, were valued in society as healers, caretakers, and teachers of ancient traditions. The spirit of Hawaiian tradition makes room for all people, whether you identify as wahine, kāne, or mähū, and everyone deserves the same unconditional acceptance and respect.

In the book, Ho'onani is depicted as having strong masculine features such as thick, bushy eyebrows, a rounder face, and wearing longer shorts and dark-colored tops, compared to her sister who has thin eyebrows and wears colors associated with girls such as pink and yellow. Even in the book, tensions rise when Ho'onani is auditioning with only kānes in the room who question “wahine?” “She held her place,” letting her soon-to-be warriors know that she was “strong, sure, and steady.” Throughout the story of Ho'onani's request to lead the chant, readers are invited to think about the respect and acceptance she gained from the audience and how everyone can have a

place. Though societal norms of the past may have lost their value in modern society, these ancient roles are teaching the keiki (children) that there is a place for everyone in society and that they should be treated with the same respect and acceptance. As Ho'onani performs, the audience realizes the impact of what a mähū can provide. Ho'onani gained her place in the middle, standing “strong, sure, and steady” despite the initial adversity; she “held her place.”

In the documentary *A Place in the Middle*, Ho'onani describes how her kumu (teacher) says some wahine have more kāne and some kāne have more wahine. The documentary discusses the history of native Hawaiian roles before foreigners came for kāne, wahine and mähū. The front cover of the book aligns with the documentary, in which Ho'onani is given both the kāne lei (yellow) and the wahine lei (white). Ho'onani wears both leis because she is both. The documentary explains how Ho'onani was in a high school kāne hula team because she had the most ku (male energy) even though she is biologically wahine. It also provides insight into Ho'onani's family who are missing in the book. In the documentary, Ho'onani is seen as the leader of the kāne hula group just as Gale and Song depict and illustrate through the book.

This book would pair well with titles that explore gender identity in a two-gender normed society such as *It Feels Good To Be Yourself: A Book About Gender Identity* (Theresa Thorn & Noah Grigni, 2019). It would also pair well with titles that are set in Hawai'i and explore Hawaiian culture. *Kapaemahu* by Hinaleimoana Wong-Kalu, Dean Hamer, Joe Wilson and Daniel Sousa (2022), explores the legend of four mähū who brought healing arts from Tahiti to Hawai'i, introducing the traditional role of mähūs in society. *Ohana Means Family* by Illima Loomis and Kenard Pak (2020) narrates the process of growing taro for a traditional luau, emphasizing the importance of family unity. Finally, *She Persisted: 13 American Women Who Changed the World* (Chelsea Clinton & Alexandra Boiger, 2017), addresses female empowerment and how these 13 women were trailblazers for many women and did not give into societal and cultural norms.

Heather Gale (<https://heathergale.net/>) is a former orthotist and author from New Zealand and currently lives in Canada. She is a children's nonfiction writer who loves to make stories that feature real people, such as *Ho'onani: Hula Warrior*, which was a Sakura Medal 2021 nominee. She fell in love with storytelling as a young girl during long drives in which family members told a story that reflected the scenery they had just passed.

Mika Song (<https://www.mikasongdraws.com/>) is a Pacific Islander who grew up in the Philippines and in Hawai'i and currently lives in New York. She is a children's writer/illustrator who makes stories about outsiders. She has a passion for comic strips and even has a free newsletter website which she started alongside Jen de Oliviera that sends weekly comic strips for students to read. She has received the Portfolio Award from the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators.

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