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TT Awardee Spotlight: Amber Strong Makaiau

The application window for the 2016 Teaching Tolerance Award for Excellence in Teaching closes on December 15. Read how this award has impacted Amber Strong Makaiau, a 2011 awardee.

By Learning for Justice Staff | December 1, 2015

Editor's note: The application window for the 2016 Teaching Tolerance Award for Excellence in Teaching will be open through December 15, 2015. To give educators more insight into the awardee experience, we'll be featuring Q&As with four previous awardees on the TT blog throughout the application window. This spotlight on Amber Strong Makaiau is the final post in the series. Be sure to read the first, second and the third posts.

Tell us about yourself, including what you teach.

Born and raised on the *Hawai'ian* island of Oahu, I live in Honolulu with my husband and two children. I come from a long line of educators who have inspired me to take risks and to be creative in the work that I do to promote social justice in schools. I work at the University of Hawai'i Uehiro Academy for Philosophy and Ethics in Education. For close to 13 years, I used the philosophy for children Hawai'i (p4cHI) approach to teach social studies at Kailua High School. Now, I teach pre-service teacher education courses and professional development classes related to social studies and p4cHI. I also practice p4cHI with elementary and high school students and teachers across Hawai'i and abroad.

What about the Teaching Tolerance Award for Excellence in Teaching made you want to apply?

I had been teaching full-time while working on my Ph.D. when one of my professors encouraged me to apply for the award. I deeply respect TT and this professor, so I clicked on the link to the application and started reading through all of the questions. I remember thinking, *Wow! These questions actually get at the heart of why I do what I do in classrooms.* I couldn't believe that there was a

national award that recognized teachers for making these types of commitments! At that point, I decided to apply.



This article contains a multimedia feature that is available at the web address above.

What types of relationships did you build with fellow awardees, Teaching Tolerance staff, etc.?

The opportunity to meet and build relationships with amazing educators from all over the United States has been one of the best parts of receiving this award. I feel like I've got a network of like-minded educators and friends across the United States, and that's an incredible feeling when you live in the middle of the Pacific Ocean!

Not only have I met fellow awardees, TT staff, university professors and other educational professionals who are dedicated to social justice work, but I've also had the opportunity to collaborate with them on a number of meaningful projects. A really good example of this collaboration is the *Perspectives for a Diverse America* professional development experiences that we've been able to design and tailor to the specific needs and interests of Hawai'i teachers. Truly a joint effort, this partnership with the folks at TT helped produce the *Perspectives for a Diverse Hawai'i* evaluation.

What has the award meant for your practice (and, perhaps, your life)?

The award helped confirm my commitment to multicultural, culturally responsive and social justice education. A constant reminder about why I do what I do in the classroom, this award has strengthened my voice and boosted my confidence in my ability to make positive change in the world. It has also opened doors and expanded the ways in which I am able to support the students, teachers and communities that I work with. The most profound example is His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet's visit to Kailua High School. Largely due to the good exposure that the school received from the TT Award, his visit had a deep impact on our school community, including our increased dedication to creating a more peaceful, tolerant and compassionate society.

What recommendations do you have for people who are considering applying for the award?

Apply! You will have the opportunity to reflect on and identify the ways in which you draw from your students' cultures and languages to create both a rigorous and relevant learning environment. The application process will improve your ability to articulate your practice to others, and it will help you think about the ways that you want to improve upon the good work that you are already doing. And this

award is larger than just you! While it brings recognition to all of your hard work, it also increases the chances that more people will see the value of incorporating culturally responsive, culturally relevant and multicultural education practices into the mainstream curriculum.

And last but not least, what tips do you have for how teachers can stay fresh and inspired in their teaching?

Cultivate and nurture a professional community of inquiry. Begin by surrounding yourself with positive and engaged educators. Even if it is just one other teacher, find someone who you enjoy collaborating with and design a project that you can work on together. In all of my years of teaching, it has been my fellow educators who have helped me to think big and motivated me to make big things happen.

Give yourself the time to get good at something, and then challenge yourself to take a risk and try something new. This year, for the first time ever, I was given the opportunity to run a p4cHI class with a small group of elementary students at my daughter's school. Talk about an opportunity to grow! It's very different from the high school and college classrooms that I'm most comfortable in. I'm having to rethink tried-and-true strategies, come up with new methods of classroom management, and learn about the diverse interests of third- through sixth-graders.

Make sure to reflect. One of the most important tools that I use in my teaching practice is a journal. Through journaling, I am able to center my thoughts, deal with my frustrations and reconnect with the core reasons that I became a teacher. It inspires me to live an examined and meaningful life both inside the classroom and out.

Thinking about applying? Learn more here!