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How Alaska Airlines Foundation helps students ClimbHI – creating lift and inspiring Hawaii’s future tourism leaders



[Tim Thompson, Executive Director for the Alaska Airlines Foundation](#) | August 27, 2019



ClimbHI’s college interns help coordinate the annual LEI program, which brings together 1,000 student participants from 42 Hawaii high schools to learn about opportunities in the state’s number one industry: tourism. (Photo courtesy of ClimbHI)

Even in high school, Geraldine “Denden” Ilan knew she wanted a career in sharing aloha.

The 2016 graduate of Waipahu High School on the island of Oahu was inspired when she joined the Leadership, Exploration and Inspiration (LEI) Program offered by ClimbHI, a nonprofit based in Honolulu that gives young people the chance to explore careers in Hawaii’s number one industry: tourism.

Geraldine “Denden” Ilan at work during her internship with the Hawaii Lodging & Tourism Association. Ilan is a former LEI program student participant and college intern. (Photo courtesy of ClimbHI.)

“At the time, I still wasn’t sure what exactly I wanted to do in the industry, but I knew that I wanted to spread the same aloha spirit that I was given during my time with LEI,” says Ilan, who is now a student at Hawaii Pacific University with an internship at the Hawaii Lodging & Tourism Association.

This combination of inspiration and opportunity is just one way that the Alaska Airlines Foundation is creating lift – investing in community programs that enable young people to imagine and reach new possibilities. ([Learn more](#) about how Alaska is creating sustainability through lift.) For 20 years, the

independent 501(c)3 Alaska Airlines Foundation has been investing in communities through grants to nonprofits like ClimbHI.

“We’re here because of our communities, and our aim is to thrive together for generations to come,” says Diana Birkett Rakow, chair of the Alaska Airlines Foundation Board of Directors. “As we look out over the horizon, we will grow and expand the foundation and work with partners to help inspire, empower and equip young people to connect to career opportunities and realize strong futures.”

Julie Morikawa, ClimbHI president and CEO, with LEI program college interns. (Photo courtesy of ClimbHI.)

ClimbHI founder Julie Morikawa says her “ah-ha” moment to create the organization came when she returned home after working on the mainland in the travel and tech industries. “It became clear there was very little connection between our education system and the main industry in Hawaii,” says Morikawa, now ClimbHI’s president and CEO. “Through ClimbHI, we provide career exploration at a critical time when students are asking themselves, ‘What next?’”

“We are that bridge in connecting their current high school work and the endless opportunities that await them on their next journey,” Morikawa says.

Over 1,000 students across the Hawaiian Islands participate in ClimbHI’s LEI program each year – just one way the organization helps students explore careers in hospitality and tourism. “Whether or not a student decides to go into the (tourism) industry, the program is really about them finding their confidence to believe in their dreams and follow a path to making those dreams a reality,” Morikawa says. “We provide the inspiration and confidence so our students can follow their dreams and succeed.”

Ilan, who is also a peer mentor at Hawaii Pacific University, appreciates the wide range of experiences. “There is always something to learn about each day, and I love that there is never a dull moment in this industry,” Ilan says.

Over the past two decades, the Alaska Airlines Foundation has supported communities with cash grants to nonprofits totaling over \$2 million – focusing on programs that benefit young people in the communities served by the airline.

“We’re making a long-term commitment to young people, especially those who don’t start out with easy access to opportunity,” Birkett Rakow says. “This round of donations pays homage to the Foundation’s history and commitment to communities while beginning to chart a new course for the future.”

In the first half of 2019, the Alaska Airlines Foundation made grants to the following 24 organizations:

Alaska:

Anchorage Museum

Covenant House Alaska

Girl Scouts of Alaska

Ilisagvik College

Junior Achievement of Alaska

Seward Association for the Advancement of Marine Science

Story Works

Volunteers of America – Alaska

Hawaii:

Big Brothers Big Sisters Hawaii

ClimbHI

Friends of Hawaii Robotics

Girl Scouts of Hawaii

Malama Learning Center – Islander Scholars

Nalukai Foundation

Washington:

After-School All-Stars

Asian Counseling and Referral Service

Communities in Schools

College Success Foundation

El Centro De La Raza

Juma Adventures

Reading Partners’

Seattle Education Access

Washington STEM Center

YouthCare

The Alaska Airlines Foundation is currently updating its grant guidelines, and in 2020 will expand to add grant opportunities in California and Oregon.

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