

## MAKING DREAMS COME TRUE

By Tim Thompson

» **Even in high school**, Geraldine Ilan knew she wanted a career sharing aloha, the Hawaiian word for love, affection, peace, compassion and mercy.

The 2016 graduate of Waipahu High School on the Island of O‘ahu was inspired when she joined the Leadership, Exploration and Inspiration (LEI) Program offered by ClimbHI, a nonprofit based in Honolulu that is supported by the Alaska Airlines Foundation. ClimbHI gives high school and college students the chance to explore careers in one of Hawai‘i’s most important industries—tourism.

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

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

More than 1,000 students across Hawai‘i 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,” says ClimbHI founder Julie Morikawa. “We provide the inspiration and confidence so our students can follow their dreams and succeed.”

Morikawa says the “aha!” moment that spurred her to create the organization came in 2011, when she returned home to Hawai‘i after working on the mainland in the travel and technology industries. “It became clear to me



» **ClimbHI President Julie Morikawa, wearing the lei po‘o (flower crown), poses with 2019 LEI program interns, including Geraldine Ilan, in the upper-left corner.**

that there was very little connection between Hawai‘i’s education system and one of the main industries in Hawai‘i,” says Morikawa, ClimbHI’s president. “Through ClimbHI, we provide career exploration at a critical time when students are asking themselves, ‘What’s next?’ We are that bridge connecting their current high school work to the endless opportunities that await them on their next journey.”

Supporting nonprofits, such as ClimbHI, is just one of the ways Alaska Airlines invests in community programs that enable young people to imagine new possibilities and reach their goals.

The Alaska Airlines Foundation is part of LIFT, the airline’s community investment

program that unites all of the company’s social and environmental impact efforts. Foundation LIFT grants are focused on helping young people make career connections and providing support for nonprofits in Alaska, California, Hawai‘i, Oregon and Washington.

Diana Birkett Rakow, board chair of the foundation, says the organization is continuing its commitment to young people, with a focus on programs in underserved communities.

“As we look forward, we will grow and expand the foundation,” Birkett Rakow says. “We want to work with partners to help inspire, empower and equip young people to connect to career opportunities and realize strong futures.” ✂

■ Interested organizations can learn more about Alaska Airlines LIFT programs by visiting [donationsalaskaair.com](https://donationsalaskaair.com).