

Fred Peleke Flores

Ellison S. Onizuka Memorial Award

The Alakoko Fishpond on the island of Kaua'i, Hawai'i, is a safe haven for the aquatic life, which is vital to the island's ecosystem and culture. However, over the years, many invasive plants, such as red mangrove, had taken over the area, threatening the life of native species. Mr. Peleke Flores, the Field Operations and Resource Manager for Mālama Hūel'ia, is essential to the revitalization of the Alakoko Fishpond and to sustaining its cultural heritage for generations to come.



Flores's work to revitalize the fishpond has allowed endangered indigenous species, which are critically important to Native Hawaiian culture, to repopulate and thrive. But it is his work to pass his knowledge to the next generation that has been noted by the community.

Ellison S. Onizuka, the first AAPI NASA astronaut, died aboard the Challenger space shuttle on January 28, 1986. He often visited Hawaii's public schools, where he was a student, to encourage the younger generation to work hard to achieve their dreams. Flores is another Hawaiian community member who encourages the local children to explore their dreams and connect with their community. Flores encourages Native Hawaiian students to connect with their land and their culture as they learn about the native ecosystem. As Keoni Pau, Hawaiian Culture and Language Teacher at Chiefess Kamakaha Middle School, explains, "Flores's ability to connect with learners of all levels is important in moving forward. *Haumana* (students) not only learn the logistics and science of the habitat, they also build a sense of *pilina* (belonging or connection) to the land that they live on. They learn *kuleana* (responsibility) for caring for the land and sea that provide for them and their *'ohana* (family) which are core values of Hawaiian culture. He teaches *aloha* (love) for the land in his lessons but moreover by showing them with his work."

In October 2023, Flores organized an event in which 2,000 volunteers came to Alakoko Fishpond to help rebuild the 500 year old rock wall (*kūapa*). This involved training over 100 leaders and ensuring cultural practitioners and experts were included. As Alex Nelson, Teacher at Kaua'i High School, described Flores, "He works so hard to make sure the rights of and stories of the Native Hawaiian people are still protected and cherished in Hawaii and beyond." As a beacon of Native Hawaiian community empowerment, Peleke Flores is this year's recipient of the Ellison S. Onizuka Memorial Award.