



Taking The Lead At Le Jardin

After a decades-long career in education that kept Earl Kim mostly on the mainland, the Kāneʻohe native has returned home to become head of school at Le Jardin Academy.

Earl Kim visits with Le Jardin Academy students as they hone their fine motor skills. **LAWRENCE TABUDLO PHOTOS**

By Jaimie Kim Farinas

Had it not been for adults merely taking notice of a young Earl Kim, there's no telling where he might be today. The self-described "knucklehead" and "kolohe kid," you see, was no ace in the classroom.

No, Kim required a little something extra — a village, as the old proverb goes: a dad who handed him a book in fifth grade that sparked an interest in reading, and who enrolled him at 'Iolani School; a seventh-grade teacher who sent the disinterested student sitting in the back of class to a more advanced level of math the following year; the legendary coach Eddie Hamada who informed a ninth-grader and his brother that they were recipients of a scholarship after their dad lost his job, despite not being athletes.

All of it and more helped coax out quite the aptitude

for academics.

Impressively, Kim went on to graduate from not one but two Ivy League colleges: Cornell and Princeton.

So maybe it should come as no surprise that Kim eventually turned to the very profession he could never have done without.

For more than 30 years, he has taken on the role of educator, and now the Kāneʻohe native is back home as head of school at Le Jardin Academy — ready to see that its approximately 770 students in preschool through 12th grade are poised for success.

"We are driven by ... each individual child's measure of their own success in life, whether it's being the next NASA physicist or the next kumu hula," he says. "Whatever the yardstick of success is for the kid, we want to provide them with what they need."

At the age of 23, Kim retired from a four-year career as a lieutenant with the U.S. Marine Corps to pursue a longtime interest in education.

"I loved the service and it seemed to be loving me back, but I knew that this was about more than just how I felt," he says.

Landing in New Jersey, home to his then new wife, he promptly began calling local high schools inquiring about work.

However naïve, the tactic worked with one vice principal at Trenton Central High School, who invited Kim to tour the campus — and then hired him on the spot, setting him on a path that would see Kim go on to become everything from an assistant principal and principal to founder of a charter school that remains in existence today. His career brought him home briefly as head of school at Kamehameha Schools

— Kapālama from 2012 to 2016, before taking him back to the mainland where he was superintendent of Stamford Public Schools in Connecticut.

Looking to begin the next phase of his career, Kim had two options: gain international experience or return to Hawai'i once more.

"I was sitting down with a dear friend of mine ... and I said, 'So if you had the choice of working overseas or working at Le Jardin, this small private school on the Windward side, which would you choose?'"

"Without hesitating, she said, 'You need to come home. You need to serve the children of Hawai'i.'"

At Le Jardin, students undertake an International Baccalaureate curriculum. Unlike Advanced Placement, which is commonplace in the U.S., International Baccalaureate is what Kim refers to as common currency

among institutions throughout the world. It is accepted across countries, making it useful for admission into institutions in locales such as Asia, Europe and even Canada. The international school in Shanghai that children of consular staffs attend, for instance, uses International Baccalaureate, as does its counterpart in Tianjin that welcomes the progeny of company executives from all corners of the globe.

That isn't the only difference, though. Whereas Advanced Placement emphasizes content, International Baccalaureate also takes into consideration the theory of knowledge and its uses.

"It's a much deeper and richer program," says Kim.

That, in combination with everything else the school has to offer, ultimately is what Kim believes makes it quite the unique place of learning.

"I think Le Jardin stands

out because of the global mindedness that it seeks to imbue all of its young people with, tied together with that strong sense of community," he says.

As he begins his first year at the Kailua campus, that won't be changing much, either. Sure, he has ideas for the future, but in the meantime, Kim is ready to do some learning of his own.

"What are the goals? Understand where we are. Understand the major initiatives of what's envisioned when we're implementing them, and then try to come up with some solutions to those gaps that remain," he says.

And along the way, he'll be keeping a watchful eye on students, giving the same attention to them he once received.

"What I really enjoy ... is watching children develop," he says. "Seeing how they respond to individual teachers, and seeing what teachers pick up and see."