



Grassroots Go-getter

FOR KELLY MCHUGH-WHITE, COMMUNITY AND ARTS ARE A PERFECT MATCH

words **NICOLE MONTON**

KELLY MCHUGH-WHITE HAS PROVEN SHE'S ALWAYS UP FOR A CHALLENGE IF IT MEANS MAKING HER COMMUNITY A BETTER PLACE.

She's made great strides at places like Kaho'olawe Island Reserve Commission, Pacific Whale Foundation and Hui No'eau Visual Arts Center, before finally settling in as manager of SMALL TOWN * BIG ART on Maui.

"My first job ever was to convince young children that they needed classical music in their lives," she recalls with a laugh.

While studying abroad, she helped develop London Philharmonic Orchestra's SoundZone Program for children whose parents were attending the orchestra.

After graduating from Binghamton University McHugh-White went on to obtain a certificate in arts administration and nonprofit management from New York University. Her certification required an independent study in arts administration, which is what first sparked her move to the islands.

"So much of my initial research kept landing me in Hawai'i," she says. "There are more nonprofits here per capita than any other state in the nation."

She spent part of 2006 at The Art School At Kapalua on Maui as the arts administrator and teaching artist, then returned to New York to complete her independent study with Brooklyn Arts Council.

She later returned to Maui as the marketing and youth programs manager at Hui No'eau Visual Arts Center.

"Coming to Maui in 2008 was a big bear hug," McHugh-White recalls. "I felt like this is where I should have been all along. This is where I could practice and apply the skills I learned."

Later, Maui County contracted McHugh-White for some projects, including a National Endowment for the Arts grant proposal in 2017 to create a construction mitigation project for Wailuku.

"It was about to undergo some really large infrastructure construction projects, and they were looking for a way to keep the economy strong throughout the construction phase," McHugh-White says.

It wasn't just about art for art's sake. Rather, McHugh-White was writing a proposal to use the arts as a catalyst for greater community revitalization that perpetuates the area's history, sense of place and culture.

McHugh-White bolstered her arts career with experience working with youth, and stints in the television and theater industries, before combining her passions in the realm of art administration. It all ultimately brought her to Maui, where she helmed SMALL TOWN * BIG ART.

Thus, SMALL TOWN * BIG ART was born with funding to take the program from 2019 to 2020. From large-scale murals to unique art installations, there's a little bit of everything under the SMALL TOWN * BIG ART Wailuku umbrella, and accompanying each piece of art is a Hawaiian proverb (selected by Hale Hō'ike 'ike at the Bailey House/Maui Historical Society) that ties it in with the place and community. The larger-than-life Chinese Take Out: Super Size at the Maui County Building, for example, is adorned with 'olelo no'eau "O ke aloha ke kuleana o kahi malihini," which translates to "love is the host in strange lands." (A full list of works can be found online at smalltownbig.org.)

Though the SMALL TOWN * BIG ART grant for Wailuku expired in 2020, Maui County believes so strongly in the project that it committed to provide funding for another year.

"We're hearing from other neighborhoods that they want SMALL TOWN * BIG ART," McHugh-White explains.

"What's most exciting about all of this is the connections we made along the way," she shares. "The real, organic process of creating community. It's those stories of people you're meeting along the way that makes the program worthwhile." ■

PHOTOS COURTESY KELLY MCHUGH-WHITE