

ECONOMIC SELF-  
SUFFICIENCY

## HO'OKAHUA WAIWAI

To have choices and a sustainable future, Native Hawaiians will progress toward greater economic self-sufficiency.

# E200 graduates its first Hawai'i class



Celebrating the graduation of Hawai'i's first E200 Leadership Initiative class are, front row, from left: Jane Sawyer of the Small Business Administration, students Myounghee Noh, Christine Thomas, Angel Aiwohi, Lourdes Marcelo, Chad Taniguchi and Instructor Julie Percell. Back rows, from left: students Dennis Nishiguchi, Mike Chun, Tracy Poepoe, Austin Nakoa, Patrick Aiona, Mark Kalahale, Debbie Hopkins and Mary Tsukayama. Missing is student Heather Manuel. — Photo: Lisa Asato

By Lisa Asato

**H**awai'i graduated its inaugural E200 Leadership Initiative class for entrepreneurs recently, and the 14 graduates have something to show for it in their collective bottom lines.

In total, they “added almost \$10 million in revenue to their collective billing – \$9.8 million in new revenue for 14 businesses – and they hired 32 new employees,” said Instructor Julie Percell, who described the inaugural group as an “MBA-level class.”

“Generally the participants might have a bachelor's degree, but many in this group are self-made entrepreneurs,” she added. “They were engaged, prepared and they had discussions at the level you would expect a group of MBA's to have. Self-made or not, these people know their businesses.”

The entrepreneurs met once a week for eight months – alternating between weekly classes and smaller group sessions. The classes were free, self-paced and involved self-assessment to examine what they were doing and what they

wanted to achieve, establishing goals, and gaining a better understanding of financials, marketing, access to capital and human resources. “That's a big issue everybody identified on the first night,” Percell said, referring to personnel. “The toughest problem was where to get good employees.”

All the students must meet three requirements: they must have been in business for three years, must be billing at minimum \$350,000 annually in gross sales, and must have at least one employee.

Although the class has existed for four years in other states, it was the first for Hawai'i. Jane Sawyer, District Director of the U.S. Small Business Administration in Hawai'i, saw the value in the program, which addresses underserved communities such as Native Americans and Native Hawaiians, and brought it to the Islands, Percell said. This year, Hawai'i was among the 27 urban areas served nationwide.

Heather Manuel, Executive Member of Tails of Hawai'i, a pet lodging, day care and grooming facility, was one of nine Native Hawaiian graduates. Manuel, a wife and mother of three who runs two locations and has 35 employees,

said the class was demanding with her time, but was well worth it.

“When you're gaining so much, you make it happen,” said Manuel, a former Aloha Airlines flight attendant who started her business in 2006 after an injury. She launched her business after taking an entrepreneurship class subsidized by OHA and receiving a Mālama Loan from OHA.

Manuel also said the class helped bring a new focus to her plans. She's envisioning an expansion model that includes adding locations that provide solely direct service to pet owners and their pets, while a centralized office would provide all the administrative support.

Tracy Poepoe, President of the construction company Trace Industries Inc., has been in business full-time for three years, and says, “The class helped me to really understand how to operate a successful business.”

The highlight, he said, was becoming aware of how much more he should understand and pay attention to the financial side of his company. Before the class, he said, “I'd just let the accounting guys take care of it, but now I know as a businessowner I need to know the numbers. This class pushed me to the next level to understand my own business. I heard the other students saying it too, ‘Oh, man I gotta start knowing (the financials).’ It makes you really crunch the numbers,” he said, adding, that he's put theory into action. On Mondays, he meets with his accountants to go over the weekly reports.

Another plus to the class was networking with the other students, he said. A federally designated small-disadvantaged business, Poepoe's company currently has contracts with Navy Facilities Engineering Command, the U.S. Coast Guard and the U.S. Army Garrison. Through the class he met other entrepreneurs whom he sees potential in working with on future jobs, such as Mark Kalahale, who runs an air-conditioning business. ■

## HOW TO APPLY

The next E200 Leadership Initiative class is anticipated to begin in late March or early April.

For an application, call SBA in Hawai'i at 541-2990.