

Sadrian Chee

#Brother Sage# draws on his own experiences to bring hope and sustenance to Hawaii's homeless

By Vicki Viotti

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The Rev. Sadrian "Brother Sage" Chee has endured more loss than most 50-year-old men should have experienced at this phase of their lives. He's pastor of the nondenominational Christian church Uhane Hemolele Piikea in Hauula, taking over the congregation from his father, who died last year.

First married when he was young, he lost his wife in 1980 and his daughter in 2003, both to car accidents. And yet it is relieving the persistent loss others experience, especially homelessness, that has become his life's work.

A major part of his focus is the Ohana Family of the Living God, the service arm of his church that, until recently, concentrated its charity meal service to the homeless at Aala Park and other, largely outdoor sites.

More recently, the Abercrombie administration's new homelessness initiative has urged the faith community and other volunteer groups to shift that outreach to more institutional sites # on this day, Chee and his crew were at the Institute for Human Services # because that way the attraction of meals could help bring the homeless to places where social services are available and can help them.

Chee is part of the network of social services, some professional, some faith-based, that is shouldering much of the assistance. In 2006, he joined Utu Langi and others to assist the Lingle administration's

homelessness response, rallying volunteers to open Kakaako's Next Step shelter in six days.

Long since remarried and happily sharing in the care of nine children and their kids, Chee is the picture of contentment.

"I'm glad I'm in the work I do # who am I to complain?" he said. "Total, I have 11 grandchildren. So I have some interest in making sure that our community continues to share that aloha.

"I'm hoping that when those children grow up, we've somehow got a handle on homelessness. We'll see what happens."

QUESTION: Do you see your work of helping the home-less to be evangelizing?

ANSWER: No. Actually my philosophy is, hopefully they see the good work that we're doing, and the question arises: Why do this? That opens up the door. Ask me why and, you know, you're going to receive the #why.# And you know, I say I'm not much of a preacher, or stand on the corner preaching; I like to say I lived a full life of work for the community.

Just 12 years ago, I had 15 years in the electric company operations. I worked as an electrician in my other life. This is another kind of light I'm generating now. (Laughs) Same business, right? Service to the community.

Q: How did the service arm of your church start?

A: I grew up that way. My grandmother always taught us, we never let anyone pass the house and you don't invite them in for food. You know, make sure they're not hungry, My dad had the same heart. Back in the #70s there was the World Hunger Project. He's done a lot of work in that area. One of our missions is that no one in our community, no one

in our state should go hungry. That's always been one of the primary missions.

Q: When did that work begin?

A: The church, Uhane Hemolele Piikea, started in the late '70s, and the actual working arm started in 1983. That's when the paperwork was drawn up, but the working arm was already in place.

Q: Was the emphasis always on hunger?

A: No. There were any facets I visited brothers (in prison) in Arizona, Oklahoma, and continue to do that. In fact, before my dad passed, we went on a final mission last year and did the 115-degree desert of Eloy, Arizona. We share aloha, that's the biggest thing, love. We reflect that to Akua, our Father, Jesus. He's my emphasis. When it comes to food you gotta have faith because it's getting tougher and tougher and tougher.

Q: OK, tell me about that, how it's getting tougher.

A: It's difficult times right now. You see the call by Food Bank, you see the call by a lot of agencies. They need help. My partnership here is I'm going to be focused on IHS, to make sure as they have this increase of 15 percent increase in food service at every meal. Which is great: With people here, I think we can bring in the kind of services, attract service providers that maybe can help them.

Q: What's your take on the governor's 90-day homelessness initiative?

A: I commend him. He's got a bigger picture to work on. He's got to focus on not just the temporary work, he has to look at something more long-term.

Q: Was it a hard decision for you to move your meal service from places like Aala Park to shelters such as IHS?

A: Been in there for years, right? We've been serving at Aala Park for over 20 years. # When it came to this, the work I've been doing, I weighed the fact that for that particular outreach, I work closely with River of Life, IHS, Aloha Harvest, so there are a lot of opportunities. It made sense: If I could get them to one place where we could have access to services, I think that would be a big plus.

Q: You hesitated at first.

A: That wasn't the main purpose we opened that outreach. My mom and dad came from across the street, Kukui Street. There was a housing system there back in the #40s, #50s. And my mom and dad and grandma and grandpa came out of that, both sides of my family. So we played in the back lane, my mom and dad, this was their back yard.

One of the things I do miss, traveling with my grandpa, is there used to be a lot of senior citizens that used to utilize the park. That's changed. # That was the first emphasis of our outreach: We focused on the senior citizens. Then they turned out to be our volunteers. Then it gave them good purpose because they could eat with someone in the park. And then it evolved. There was a time when over 50 percent, 60 percent were senior citizens; and then I remember when that community started to change.

And then the minority was the seniors, and the majority were our brothers looking for food. So one of the things we've done is look for ways to collaborate with other senior programs. We're still looking at ways where we could possibly bring a program for seniors back into that park.

Q: Do you have mixed feelings about this?

A: Nothing like having a meal in a park! It doesn't get better than that. So you gotta weigh in the advantage of whether the brothers can get more services in a setting like this (at IHS). One of the services I believe we could probably expand is some of the bed capacities at some of

the shelters. We're working diligently on trying to expand that kind of help. # I know there's a need. So possibly IHS can expand. Maybe they can't do that with their current funding. But I'm trying to do some advocacy, every chance I get, pitching to get help for them. Public sector, private sector, possibly from the faith community. # But, you know, the community doesn't want to see just one site, a big, one-sided place. It's going to take a collaboration of communities.

Out in Hauula I started the Puuhonua Initial Contact Shelter program, back in 2007. When I started that it was based on an emergency program. It was called the 40-Day Program. # We'd pick someone up from the beach. I've had individuals, the houses were sold right out from under them; amazing, the stories I have. But we want to grab these individuals, put them in a setting where, if we can keep them there for just a little bit, and bombard them with just a buffet of services. #

A lot of time they come to me for help, we find the resources and then can't find the family. Because once you get thrust into that community, you're transient. Sometimes you're on west side, sometimes Waimanalo, back in Honolulu where the services are at.

Q: Do you have a lot of success stories of families getting back on their feet?

A: Oh, I could give testimony after testimony. I think that's what drives me. You gotta have success stories to continue to do the work. If it had been failing all this time, I'd probably get into something else.

Q: What is the key to success?

A: You have to connect them to the right services.

You know the three major gap groups? Exiting substance abuse, exiting the correction system, exiting mental health # they're in a mental health program and they max out or something. No place to go. That's a tough community, man.

Someone exiting mental health, I find them on the street; one thing I have to do is try to hook them up with providers. I have relationships with Waikiki Health Center, North Shore Mental Health. # I have some individuals, they gave up trying to apply, and I know they qualify # they get the letter, #No,# and that#s final, and I tell them that#s not how it works. I#ve learned in advocacy, I don#t take the #No# # that means you just take it to the next step. And a lot of these people can#t do it on their own. So you have to hook them up with organizations. #

Sometimes it#s their own family that can help them. I#ve repaired bridges. That#s another big opportunity I have from the faith community. I get back in the family and hooponopono. People exiting substance abuse have burned many bridges. If we can repair one or two of those in time, they give them a little bit of hope and recovery.

Some programs like Access to Recovery, and some of the behavioral people I work with, makes that process just a little better, and I want to promote them.

Q: You do such serious and unrelenting work. Do you have time for leisure, or hobbies?

A: Funny. I just was invited, I got together with all these pastors and we did the Pastors Masters. I#m not a golfer, but give me a reason to hang out with a bunch of good guys, I#m there, you know?

I find time to get out in the water; I love the ocean. I love surfing, I love diving.

I find out that you gotta have some balance. I get harassed by my family sometimes: #You gotta take a break.#

My dad used to get harassed the same way.