

Indian Country Today

[Print this article](#)

The Alaska-Hawaii Connection

Originally printed at <http://www.indiancountrytoday.com/archive/28213394.html>

(Editors note: This special report was first published in the Fall 2003 edition of Native Americas, the journal of hemispheric indigenous issues published by First Nations Development Institute.)

Council for Native Hawaiian advancement

Three years ago, the Council for Native Hawaiian Advancement was organized to help nonprofits that provide Hawaiian social services apply for or keep federal funding. This range of nonprofits manages or assists in health care, housing, education and cultural programs. Robin Danner, a Native Hawaiian who, at 36, moved home to Kauai four years ago and became a part of the Hawaiian political scene, led the way to assemble the Council. After living 25 years in Alaska with her parents and brothers and sisters, she brought a working knowledge of how Alaska Natives have navigated the path to Native corporate and non-profit federal contracts. For Hawaiian nonprofits, generally seen as organizations that live off federal fat, her experience in banking and her skills in applying for and receiving federal dollars, was a welcome boost to their beleaguered situation.

Once established, the Council quickly came to include non-profit powerhouses who handle most of the millions of federal dollars earmarked for Native Hawaiians. It also includes CEOs and trustees from Native Hawaiian trusts like Kamehameha Schools (formerly known as Bishop Estates), and the Queen Lili'uokalani Trust. Since its inception, the Council has become part of the status quo, serving as facilitator of the prestigious administration for Native Americans Project, a federal contract which is worth \$1.2 million, and directed by Robin's younger sister, Jade. The Council has also received a pledge of \$100,000 from Bank of Hawaii and other institutional support, including \$100,000 from the Inupiat-owned Arctic Slope Regional Corporation.

The need for an organization like the Council became apparent in the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court's 2000 decision in *Rice v. Cayetano*. That ruling used the 14th and 15th Amendments to invalidate Hawaiian-only voting in elections to the Office of Hawaiian Affairs, a Hawaii state agency that fronts as representative of the Hawaiian people. It was the first time the 15th Amendment was used to protect the rights of a white man, Freddie Rice. Since then, funding and tax breaks given to Hawaiian nonprofits and trusts have come under legal attack as unlawful, race-based benefits. So, it made sense to put groups working on specific Hawaiian issues together so they could apply for federal grants collectively.

Lesser-known, less well-connected nonprofits looking for funding have joined or considered joining the Council, hoping to team up with other nonprofits. "My first impression of Robin Danner was that she was very cordial and had honorable intentions," said Patrick Kahawaiolaa, president of Keaukaha Community Association, a Hawaiian Homestead organization. "It was about a year-and-a-half ago and she held a workshop to talk about the Council for Native Hawaiian Advancement's goals, and technical assistance for communities hoping to get federal grants. She seemed like a very astute businesswoman who was there to help people."

What has emerged as the Council's most pressing concern, however, is not what many Hawaiian non-profit organizers were expecting. In September 2002, the Council's First Annual Native Hawaiian Conference took place at the Sheraton Waikiki. With video taped messages from the Hawaii Congressional delegation that were shown daily, the gathering took the shape of a rallying cry for the Akaka Bill. "I went to the conference to gather information and see about grant writing," said Kahawaiolaa. "But we were being lobbied to get going and push the Akaka Bill. Every day on the big screen here came Inouye and [Congressman] Abercrombie and God rest her soul [Congresswoman] Mink. Akaka even made a personal appearance and said, 'We gotta do this and you're wrong if you don't support this bill.'"

The Council held its second gathering in Waikiki in August 2003. This time the congressional giant himself, Senator Daniel Inouye, addressed several hundred Hawaiians in person, assuring them that there now exists a "rare demonstration of unity" between Hawaii state, local, and federal lawmakers on the matter of federal

recognition. Inouye then went on to urge Hawaiians to do the same and unite behind this bill.

CEO and President of the Council, Robin Danner proved her ability to gain the cooperation of influential politicians and financial institutions in a very short time. In July of 2001, more than a year before the Council hosted its first annual convention for Hawaiians, it held the "1st Annual Native Hawaiian-Alaska Native Summit." Funded by Bank of Hawaii, First Hawaiian Bank, American Savings Bank, Federal Home Loan Bank of Seattle, and others, it was an invitation-only gathering with the stated purpose of discussing common issues of managing Native trusts, foundations, and service agencies.

The participants at the summit were senior members of the United States Congress. Keynote speakers included Senators Inouye and Akaka; other speakers were then Senator, now Governor of Alaska, Frank Murkowski (who last January appointed his daughter to take over the two remaining years of his senate term); Representatives Mink and Abercrombie; Alaska Representative Don Young; and Alaska Senator Ted Stevens, who sent his message via videotape. Senator Stevens, who as pro tempore is third in line to the presidency of the United States, has put his name to the Hawaiian Federal Recognition Bill, which was re-dubbed the Akaka-Stevens Bill in June of this year.

Although Hawaiians are not organized into villages and corporations like the 138 Alaska Native villages and 13 Alaska Native Corporations that comprise the Alaska Federation of Natives, the network of Hawaiian nonprofits in the Council For Native Hawaiian Advancement is a close imitation. But the Council is either intentionally or unwittingly also mimicking the federation's interest in Alaskan oil and federal control.

(Continued in Part Three)