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COURTESY OF LOKELANI OHANA
Lokelani Ohana group members and volunteers including group founder Christina Chang (pink shirt) and her daughter Angelica (green shirt) celebrate a harvest of corn on a modest plot with organic farmer Vincent Mina and his wife, Irene.

Cultivating acceptance

The developmentally disabled blossom under the auspices of a Maui farm program

By Gary T. Kubota
gkubota@starbulletin.com

WAILUKU » Christina Chang said she began a farming program for the developmentally disabled on the Valley Isle after her daughter with autism responded well to a similar program in Pennsylvania.

The volunteer-driven program, called the Lokelani Ohana, offers a hopeful new approach in the care of people with autism, Down syndrome, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and other neurological conditions. Most adults with those disabilities live at home with aging parents.

"Our vision is to create an agricultural-based farming community living together with people of special needs, offering opportunities for individuals to be themselves, be accepted for who they are and share friendships and love," Chang said.

On a 1-acre farm in Waihee, the ohana members grow organic sweet potatoes, bananas, ulu, star fruit, avocados and various herbs, including mamaki tea.

The nonprofit group, which held opening ceremonies last month, hopes to increase awareness about the developmentally disabled in Hawaii and to raise money toward expanding services.

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The Lokelani Ohana, modeled after an international program called the Camphill Communities, focuses on developing an agrarian lifestyle in which the developmentally disabled work in a rural setting while acquiring life skills.

Chang said her daughter Angelica, 25, a part-Hawaiian, lived at a Camphill Community called Beaver Run in Pennsylvania and participated in academic, therapeutic and pre-vocational programs.

"She was accepted, loved and supported for who she is," Chang said. "She really relaxed and blossomed. It was beautiful."

There are more than 3,300 developmentally disabled people in Hawaii, including 268 on Maui.

Chang said 70 percent of adults with developmental disabilities are living with their parents. Affordable housing is even more of an issue for people with special needs, she added.

The nonprofit Arc of Maui, which has operated for more than 50 years on Maui, has four group homes on the Valley Isle, providing housing for the developmentally disabled in a residential setting as well as job training mainly in the service industry.

Chang said her group recently received a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to assist in farming the land. She is managing the farm with advice from volunteer mentor Patrick Moser, an organic farmer.

They are planning on clearing more land and cultivating wet- and dry-land taro as well as tropical flowers.

Chang said in addition to the organic farming program, Lokelani Ohana has a "saori" weaving program directed by artist Dana Allen at the Cameron Center, and both the weaving and farm program have about 65 participants.

She said other volunteers are in charge of recreational and educational programs.

Chang said the site includes farm-related structures and one house occupied by herself and her daughter. One of the group's goals is to acquire 10 to 40 acres of land to expand their services and establish more "life-sharing homes" where more developmentally disabled could live in an extended family setting, she said.

Anyone who is interested in learning more about Lokelani Ohana is invited to view their Web site at www.lokelaniohana.org or call Christina Chang at 249-0254.

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