

# Kanile'a 'Ukulele Celebrates 20 Years Of Handcrafted Music

BY PAIGE TAKEYA

**K**anile'a 'Ukulele's staff of 21 produces between 2,400-3,000 handcrafted instruments each year. That's no small feat — so as the company celebrates its 20th anniversary, it's strange to realize that it all began as, well, a hobby.

Kailua-born Joe Souza had loved singing and performing with the 'ukulele since childhood. But in his teens, he started to wonder how the instrument actually worked. He took building lessons from luthier Peter Bermudez in 1991, and maintained the hobby after marriage to wife Kristen (also of Kailua).

"They opened their first shop at their home, in the garage," said Lina Langi, who runs public relations and marketing for Kanile'a. Joe was the builder, and Kristen managed finances.

Things have grown quite a bit since then — the company now operates out of a factory

in Kāne'ohe (and the couple now live in He'eia). But Souza has always been good about maintaining his roots while still looking to the future.

"He keeps one foot in Hawaiian tradition," explained Langi, who detailed how Souza will fly to Hawai'i Island or Maui to inspect the responsibly sourced wood, and air-dry wood instead of using a kiln.

"He has his other foot in technology," Langi continued. "What is another way to bend these sides? What is the better way to create a fret bar?"

She adds that rival builders sometimes will attend Kanile'a's weekday tours (which start at 10:30 a.m.) to get a glimpse of Souza's bracing system — and he's happy to share what he knows with anyone interested.

"(Tour attendees) learn everything: from how we acquire our logs, the milling process, the drying process, how we cut, how we create — they meet all the different

craftsmen at their particular stations — how we apply finish," Langi said. "We're completely transparent when we come to our build because we want (people) to know what it takes to make this 'ukulele.

"When you're seeing an 'ukulele as a toy, people don't understand that this is a viable instrument that artists around the world, not just in Hawai'i, make their living playing and teaching."

To celebrate 20 years in business, Kanile'a 'Ukulele has a slate of activities planned, culminating in a blowout concert in September.

Up next, the company is a sponsor of the seventh annual 'Ukulele Contest and Hula Show, and 'Ukulele Picnic in Hawai'i, coming up Feb. 10-11. Kanile'a 'Ukulele also launches its first KU Competition for talented 'ukulele players age 18 and under.

For more information about the company or contest, visit [kanileaukulele.com](http://kanileaukulele.com) or call 234-2868.



(Above) Dwight Kaleohano, Frank Bortmas, Keenan Kawamata, Peter Santos and co-owner Joe Souza show off the assembly area of Kanile'a Ukulele's factory in Kāne'ohe. (Left) Kaiko'o Victor installs a nut on the neck of a new Kanile'a 'Ukulele during the final stage of construction. ANTHONY CONSILLO PHOTOS

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