Service and Kindness on the Frontlines
“Hi, how can I help you?” I asked from Line 1 at the Puainako KTA Pharmacy in Hilo. Across the line was a wide range of community members. I could see their differing personalities from the background noise and their voices. I could hear the whirring of mechanical tools, CNN blasting from the living room, wives calling to their husbands for the telephone; I could hear loneliness, joy, and hope. But they all wanted the vaccine to keep them and their families safe—that was my job.

When the pandemic came to Hilo, life went on hold; Stores closed, sporting events were cancelled, schools shut down, and I found myself confined to home. My only window to the outside world became the television. I watched the world crumble, burning with hatred as people became angry, stressed, and violent and looking for someone to blame. But I took notice of the people who tried to help. Nurses on the frontlines who were working in 24-hour shifts, tired and anxious, yet still willing to fight. Pharmacy staff who worked tirelessly to schedule senior citizens and healthcare workers for the vaccine. With the premise of a vaccine, health clinics and pharmacies became overwhelmed by scores of potential patients. Instead of laying dormant and passive, I decided to help with the effort to vaccinate and protect my community.

After searching health clinics for volunteer opportunities, the Puainako KTA Pharmacy was an obvious choice. KTA Superstores had long been an integral part of the Hilo community, acting as one of the few businesses that had been a staple in three generations of my family. I knew that I would fit in with the values of excellent customer service, and would be able to better provide my direct assistance to both the pharmacists and my community.
As I walked excitedly into the Puainako KTA Pharmacy, I paused at the door. You’re a part of the fight now, I thought. I noticed a stack of papers near my desk: a sheet, hundreds of rows long with the names of those 65 years and older and healthcare professionals. Starting with the first name, I slowly dialed the number, and waited with the dial tone ringing in my left ear. I continued down the list in a methodical fashion: dial the number, pick up the phone, schedule the appointment. Even though it may have seemed like a mundane chore from afar, I was helping those that could not help themselves. People like my grandma. Just like many other Hilo seniors, she had difficulty reading off of a screen and scheduling appointments. She would fumble with the tiny buttons, confused at every popup, every window. Lost. Every time I heard the occasional “Thank you for your service,” I realized the meaning of my work. With the pharmacy assisting with its scheduling service, seniors would not have to compromise their health with a simple technology barrier.

But it was at the vaccine clinics that I truly saw the extent of my work. Senior citizens, who I recognized from speaking on the phone by their voice, came up and greeted me at registration. I would follow them to the vaccine stations, helping them relax as the needle pierced their skin. I managed the waiting rooms where I kept many of my patients company. We talked, we laughed, and we reminisced, passing their thirty-minute waiting times with ease. And when they left, there was a broad grin on their faces.

Hawaii is a special place that I am proud to call home. Whether we know each other as friends of friends, or complete strangers, there is an innate kindness and a unique bond that is shared amongst the members of our community: the Aloha spirit.
Hawaii shows us that despite our differences in thought, personality, and appearance, we are from the same home. That makes us a community. Even with the threat of a pandemic and a deadly virus, there are still healthcare workers that have chosen to put their communities before themselves. Upon this realization, not only is being a vaccine clinic volunteer an act of service, but an act of kindness. Due to its nature, kindness is cyclic and reciprocal. Instead of looking for others to blame for the pandemic, focusing on getting through the pandemic and protecting others has helped me and many others. Kindness synergizes and heals, while hate can only divide and hurt. I looked to the healthcare workers of communities around the world who had inspired me to take action in my own community. From there, I was able to help and give back to my community as one of the workers on the frontlines.