

# Family's village includes Primary Project



**Danita Maluyo is the legal guardian of her nephews, Dezmen, Darren, Darryl and three-year-old Devyn-Jonah.**

In her own words, Danita Maluyo of Hawaii had a “super single life going” and was about to get a job on the mainland. Then suddenly she became the guardian of her four nephews.

“I had to learn how to be a mother instantly,” Maluyo, 35, said. She jokes that one of the first things she did was buy a book on parenting, but quickly found that it couldn’t come close to preparing her for the challenges ahead.

When the oldest, Darren, 8, entered Kuhio School, he had speech problems and faced a number of changes in his life, including a mom in prison, a new home and a new teacher. At the principal’s suggestion, Darren participated in Primary Project, a school-based prevention program developed by Children’s Institute.

Primary Project enhances children’s social and emotional competencies, helping them become better adjusted to the school environment. When children feel comfortable at school, learning can more easily occur.

Primary Project matched three of the boys with an adult who met individually with each child. The boys each built a safe and consistent relationship with the adult Child Associates by using the language that young children know best—expressive play.

“The playroom became his kingdom, where he could do whatever he needed,” Maluyo said. “Drawing became a way for him to share his feelings.”

Primary Project has also helped Darren’s younger brothers as well. Six-year-old Darryl is a special education student



(2007) - Primary Project celebrated its 50th anniversary. This prevention program has helped over 1 million children in 2,100 schools across the U.S.

at Alawai School who struggles with focusing his attention and regulating his emotions. Time in Primary Project has helped Darryl become more comfortable and less of an attention-seeker.

At five years old, Dezmen, or Dezi, is a small, tough, quiet and independent boy. While his speech delay makes it difficult to understand what he says, that hasn’t gotten in the way of him playing and talking with his Child Associate. “He listens to Dezi and relates to him, regardless of what he wants to talk about,” Maluyo said. “That means a lot to him.”

An important component of Primary Project for Maluyo has been that the Child Associates have allowed the boys to be themselves through the use of expressive play. The changes she’s seen in them as a result of the program have been tremendous.

Darren used to call himself negative names and she recalls one day he came home and said, “Call me Mana,” which in Hawaiian means strong.

Mana also loves school and the other children love him. “Even though he has a speech impediment, he has a passion to help his peers, so he speaks up,” Maluyo said. “It’s awesome to see him comfortable and a contributing member of his community.”

While life as a family still has its ups and downs, Maluyo feels that Primary Project has given them the skills to handle what comes along. “In our Hawaiian Phillipino culture, we’re not taught to

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assert ourselves or to speak up,” she said. “I think it’s great that the boys have learned how to express their feelings and voice their needs appropriately, so that when I’m not around, they can stand up for themselves in the company of others.”

Maluyo also is grateful for the people she’s met through Primary Project. “Life is a whole lot easier because they are part of my village,” she added. The extended school team has helped with parenting classes, tutors for the children and after school care and other critical resources.

“These are the people I want to see at my boys’ graduations and weddings. They were there at the beginning and helped all of us grow as individuals,” she added, with a smile.

*Primary Project was featured on RNEWS in November 2007.*

## **Extra Attention. Positive Results.**

After 40 years in education, school administrators like Linda Knapp, principal of Harp Elementary in Springdale, Arkansas, remain optimistic about schools and children and families. “We’ll never run out of kids who will need Primary Project,” she said. “Parents want the best for their children, and this is an inexpensive and effective way for us to help them.”

Whether it’s the child who hangs around the teacher instead of running on the playground, is disruptive in class, or who shares a home with a severely disabled sibling, Knapp believes that Primary Project is a great way to provide them with the extra attention they need to get off to a good start in school. “When children have their social and emotional needs met, they learn better,” she said. “The difference we see in these children in a short time is amazing.”

In the past five years, Knapp estimates that 400 children have gone through Primary Project at her school. Better achievement scores and great data demonstrate the difference the program has made in the lives of her students. “They’re making good gains everywhere,” she added.