



Olelo's new wavelength

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An attorney by trade, Roger McKeague's career has taken him from roles in government, health and education, as well as technical fields in Hawaii and on the Mainland, to running the show at Olelo Community Media as the nonprofit's president and chief executive officer. Often, he has been tasked with fixing an organization's problems.

"My dad used to tell me, 'You're a fireman, too, in a way, you just work different kinds of fires,'" McKeague told Pacific Business News.

"I like to go to places where I can help – adjust, scale up, organize – that's what draws me in, the opportunity to fly from all the places I've landed at different times in my life," he said. "The challenge, however, is fixing the plane while in flight."

The University of Hawaii at Manoa graduate received a Juris Doctor from the Northwestern School of Law of Lewis & Clark College and began his legal career as an associate at Honolulu firm Dwyer Imanaka Schraff Kido Meyer & Fujimoto.

He was the executive director of the Hawaii State Charter School Commission Administrative Office, and prior to that, worked for a former state health director and lead policy analyst for former Gov. Linda Lingle.



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Roger McKeague, Olelo Community Media President and CEO, Tuesday, April 5, 2022, in Honolulu.

Most recently, McKeague was living in Seattle, where he worked as a business consultant and attorney, and also held executive positions at IT companies Sector 5 and Tekvisions, which primarily serve public school districts.

He returned to Hawaii during the Covid-19 pandemic to reconnect with and ensure the safety of his family – wife Teresa and two daughters, who stayed in Hawaii over the summers and while in school remotely in Seattle.

“It also enables us to ... provide and enjoy the stability of our families being nearby during these troubled times,” he said. “Being able to reconnect with the aina was also a draw to coming home.”

A strategic redirection

McKeague succeeded Sanford Inouye in April of 2021, who retired after five years leading the organization. Inouye had grown the reach of Olelo, adding programs and improving services. Inouye’s tenure included responding to the the case of Hanalei Aipoalani, Olelo’s former human resources director and vice president, who pled guilty on March 26, 2021 to federal charges of embezzlement and bribery for taking money from the nonprofit media company’s AmeriCorps program and its Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security, or CARES Act funding. Both Aipoalani and media partner Stacy Higa, former executive of Na Leo TV and a former Hawaii County official, were sentenced for embezzlement and bribery in 2022, according to media accounts and court records.

McKeague said Olelo’s staff and board members were “sorely devastated and disappointed” when an internal-audit-turned-investigation revealed nearly five years of financial mismanagement by Aipoalani, who was let go by Olelo in May 2019.

The incident report came out on a Saturday about three weeks into his job with Olelo, he recalled, and by Monday, he prepared to make a public statement about the case.

To help the organization recover, McKeague provided necessary updates to the media, working with authorities on compliance, hired a new finance and HR director, and brought in a new asset auditor for Olelo and a state of Hawaii Department of Commerce and Consumer Affairs, or DCCA, auditor, both for fresh eyes and a deeper dive into the organization’s internal controls. “We’re finding ways to strengthen how we do business internally,” McKeague said.

To uplift Olelo’s employee morale and increase security, he installed I.D. theft protection for staff and implemented Olelo’s

Employee Assistance Program, complete with wellness checks.

"Covid already made people feel bad," he said. "But to stop the bleed, we hired new talent, opened the door for employees to grow and worked on pathways for their future success. Now, our team overall has more experience."

Another focus for him has been fair compensation.

"We looked at our budget, moved some things around, brought in new team members, updated job descriptions and created a living wage at Olelo," he said. "My goal is to encourage [the staff] and remind them that we're still doing our great work."

McKeague also prioritized maintaining a good working relationship with Olelo's board of directors.

"I've been on a lot of boards, so I've worked under many different models," he said. "I've learned if you don't revisit something often enough, you'll forget it. I hope to bring my accumulated board experience and for us to be closer and more focused."

Board chair perspective

Olelo Board Chair Nelson Lau said the organization is now in a better position, with McKeague's energy and ideas geared toward exploring new ways to serve and elevate the community, which paired well with the direction the nonprofit was headed.

"We have a unique opportunity at Olelo for people to better understand what we stand for and how we can help – we've been provided the funds and equipment to help the community share their concerns, thoughts, information," Lau said.

"As I gained more experience with the organization, my role has been to better develop this. If people don't know about us, then shame on us," he continued.

Lau, a former certified public accountant, and 12-year Olelo board member said lessons learned from the Aipoalani case highlighted the need for good internal controls to identify issues early on. "Think of it like insurance or investing ahead of time," he explained.

"This journey started with Roger's predecessor – questions had come up with staff about transactions that weren't adding up, and we were quick to include to the feds and give those doing the digging enough time to do their job," he said.

"A lot of us were shocked something like this would happen, but we want to take responsibility for it; we want to be reflective, and we

want to do better.”

One goal for the 14-person board this year is to “think about what we do and how we do it,” Lau said. “This pandemic taught us a lot about pivoting and redelivering our services.”

McKeague is looking forward to reinforcing and retraining the board on best practices when it comes to meetings and communication.

“I’m looking for them to bring their expertise to the table in the new year,” he said. “This will make for a better-informed board, a better use of our time, and better training overall.”

The show must go on

Since his appointment, McKeague has spearheaded efforts to rebuild trust and transparency within the community-access television provider’s staff, board of directors and 2,900 community members, 745 of which are currently active and use its facilities and equipment – to strengthen communication and connectivity across the Islands.

As a Public, Education, and Government, or PEG, access provider, Olelo’s six cable channels on Spectrum and Hawaiian Telcom are regulated by the DCCA and funded by both cable operators’ subscriber dues.

“When awarding franchises for the use of public rights of way to offer cable television service, many local jurisdictions required the cable companies to set aside some of their channel capacity for PEG use and to provide financial support for those PEG access channels,” McKeague said. “Those channels are not mandated by federal law. But the Cable Communications Policy Act of 1984 amended the Communications Act to explicitly allow franchising authorities to require cable operators to set aside channel capacity for PEG use and to provide adequate facilities or financial support for those channels.”

“These PEG provisions have been a primary vehicle for fostering in cable systems the long-standing U.S. media policy goal of localism,” he added, noting that across the state’s four counties, the local jurisdiction is the DCCA.

“We work closely with our Neighbor Island colleagues [like] Kauai’s Hoike, Big Island’s Na Leo, and Maui’s Akaku, especially in sharing government programming for statewide distribution,” McKeague said.

On Oahu, Olelo, as its Hawaiian naming indicates, was created in 1989 so community voices could be heard and shared more broadly.

“We are champions of access,” he said. Now, Olelo touts innovative technology and facilities designed to stream On-demand and on its Olelo Captioned Calls app, in addition to its social media platforms.

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, Olelo remained a critical resource for 24/7 information.

“We never shut down – we continued to produce and track what was happening with policy changes at the state-level. People still need to know what’s happening, so to some degree, we’re a vital form of communication,” McKeague said.

Olelo also offers video and production training for the public, teachers and students, and government officials across the island; equipment loans, which during the pandemic pivoted to curbside pick-up; and executive production, for community event coverage. Its Youth Xchange Video Competition promotes media education in local schools and partnerships with Kumu Kahua Theatre, TAG – The Actors’ Group – and the Hawaii Shakespeare Festival aim to grow its reach.

“The local performing arts play a critical role in sharing our culture and nurturing our storytellers,” he said. “Like Olelo, these organizations are giving the community a voice, and we are proud to share their work with broader audiences.”

McKeague is looking for state, government and nonprofit partners to help fund and drive Olelo’s mission forward, including federal infrastructure laws related to broadband. This funding would develop Olelo’s plans to introduce an over-the-top media service offered directly to viewers via the Internet on Amazon Fire, Apple, and Roku TVs to reach all of Hawaii’s communities.

“The way media is being consumed keeps changing, so we must adapt – this is exciting for me, and for those in the business community: to bring more access and connectivity to more people,” he said.

The nonprofit’s annual budget of more than \$7 million is primarily derived from franchise fees, which in 2021, represented 75% of its operating revenue. Rental income and other revenues make up the remaining amount. “We aim to do more with less, find ways to sustain, and to enable our forward momentum,” McKeague added.

Its biggest expense is salary costs for the organization's 63 staff, he said – a valuable investment to boost employee growth and well-being.

"You can't deliver on mission, if you don't have staff excited to come into work," he said.

"What gets me out of bed in the morning is seeing the staff reenergized, the strategic partnerships we're creating, and the positive impact we'll be making in the next several years."

The wrap

What's next for Olelo?

McKeague hopes to share more of Hawaii's "hidden stories" – the stories that are not being heard or that are fading away.

"I want to save and preserve them," he said.

"We're about storytelling," he said. "The need is more significant than we'd think, so we're looking to expand broadband, media, digital literacy training, and accessibility statewide, with the stories we do tell."

Olelo fast facts

Launched: 1984

Staff: 63

Board members: 14

Budget: \$7 million annually

Locations: 6 media centers on Oahu: *Kaimuki • Kaneohe • Mapunapuna • Nanakuli • Wahiawa • Waipahu*

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