

Hawaii News

# Hui of students at UH-Manoa tries to get peers into politics



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The Daniel K. Inouye Leaders in Action club wants to get University of Hawaii students more involved in issues facing their generation. Members include Rio Kwon, left, David Enriquez, Sally Park, Esther Choi and Kelly Park.

Three Kaiser High School graduates are working to overcome voter apathy and get their classmates at the University of Hawaii more involved in solving local and global issues, starting with getting them to vote.

The year-old, 30-member UH-Manoa club called Daniel K. Inouye Leaders in Action

grew out of Hawaii's 2014 general election, which had an all-time low voter turnout of 52.3 percent of registered voters, said Lisa Shiota, communications officer for UH's College of Social Sciences.

"This worrisome trend spurred DKI Leaders in Action members to pursue innovative ways of tackling critical issues facing the state, such as housing, job creation, sustainability, economics and tourism," Shiota said.

At a commuter campus, the members of the club believe that busy UH students want to be more engaged but simply don't know how.

"More than apathy, I feel that students do care but they don't know where to start or how to implement their ideas," said Esther Choi, a 19-year-old UH sophomore who is studying both Korean and political science and wants to become an environmental lawyer. "This club is perfect for that."

Choi had been student body treasurer and student body president at Kaiser, where she "tried to get the students engaged," adding, "We did a lot of student-driven activities, and I wanted to continue that in college."

But Choi could not find a vehicle at UH to get more involved in community and global issues, especially environmental sustainability.

Sisters Kelly and Sally Park recruited Choi — along with Kaley Tengan, a 22-year-old economics senior, and Rio Kwon, a first-year law student — to form the nucleus of what became Daniel K. Inouye Leaders in Action. Both Park sisters had served as Kaiser's student body vice president their senior years.

They chose to name their club after Inouye with easy deliberation.

"We really thought that Sen. Inouye's role in the state and his values and mission describe what we wanted to become and reflect," said Kelly Park, the club's president.

Inouye's chief of staff, Jennifer Goto Sabas, has mentored the club "and let us contact people in her network," Park said.

In October Sabas invited some of the club's leaders to a Smithsonian Institution event in Kakaako titled "What It Means to Be an American."

The club's first event, in July, was live-streaming a Library of Congress public lecture called "Finding Shared Values for U.S. Foreign Policy" at UH's Campus Center student TV lounge.

The lecture was preceded and followed by discussions of various foreign policy issues.

Then in October the club organized a "speed-dating" forum in which 32 UH students got one-on-one time with state legislators and former City Councilman Stanley Chang.

The format was suggested by state Sen. Jill Tokuda (D, Kailua-Kaneohe), who also encouraged the students to ask tough questions of the politicians, including Tokuda, Park said.

"She was saying it was OK to be personal and ask questions about some of the biggest challenges they faced, what was it like to lose an election — questions we thought it might be too personal to ask publicly," Park said.

In April, Sally Park and Choi will talk about the speed-dating experience in front of other students from around the country at a three-day Clinton Global Initiative University Conference at the University of California, Berkeley.

Park, a 21-year-old junior majoring in Korean and biology, plans to go on to UH's medical school. In the short term she hopes to return from Berkeley with even more ideas of how to get Hawaii students involved.

"A lot of other schools probably have great ideas that we never thought about," Park said. "We hope to bring great ideas from other schools back to UH-Manoa."

Her older sister, Kelly Park, 26, is a graduate student studying economics and wants to work "in international relations from a government point of view," possibly as a diplomat.

Through Daniel K. Inouye Leaders in Action, Park wants to tap into other UH students' desire "to be involved in policy and learn critical issues in our state and do something about it, rather than just short-term volunteering."

Next semester, with issues such as global warming and the U.S. presidential election dominating headlines, the club plans to promote voting by UH students both in person and through the club's Facebook page, which features a group photo that includes Chang and state Sens. Tokuda and Donovan Dela Cruz (D, Wahiawa-Whitmore-Mililani Mauka) and state Reps. Aaron Ling Johanson (D, Fort Shafter-Moanalua Garden-Aliamanu), Kaniela Ing (D, South Maui), Della Au Belatti (D, Moiliili-Makiki-Tantalus) and Beth Fukumoto Chang (R, Mililani-Mililani Mauka-Waipio Acres).

In April the club plans to live-stream the second of five annual lectures planned by the Library of Congress, which will focus on "the importance that Sen. Inouye placed on bipartisanship and moral courage," Shirota said.

This year's lecture at the student TV lounge drew 60 people, Park said.

For April she's hoping to find an even bigger venue for an even bigger crowd that she hopes will turn out.