

# Teacher's love helps kids through hardships

By Lee Cataluna

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Seventh-grader Stone Jessee, left, Rod "Mr. Rod" Maghsoudlou, and seventh-graders Micah Kaonohi-Kaihenui and JR Earnell pose on the Kailua Intermediate School campus, above. Mr. Rod stands in a hallway of the school and reaches out to students as they hurry to afternoon classes, at right.

Rod Maghsoudlou doesn't eat lunch during lunchtime. Instead, he walks the campus, winding through knots of seventh- and eighth-grade students reaching out for hands to shake. He seems to know everyone's name and details about their lives — how close they were to making honor roll last quarter, what professional sports team they follow, each child's burdens and each child's goals.

When the bell rings, he stands in the middle of the hallway, the main thoroughfare of Kailua Intermediate School, so he can make contact with as many students as possible as they hustle to class. He stands with arms stretched wide, his hair radiating like a nimbus, sending out greetings to each student who passes — high-fiving, knuckle-bumping, sometimes hugging.

Mr. Rod, as the kids call him, does something else, too. He tells the students, "I love you." He does this often, and he says it in a way that is both super casual but deeply felt.

"A former student of mine told me how much it meant to have someone say, 'I love you,' during the day, and told me, 'Don't you ever stop doing that,'" Mr. Rod says. "Some people hear it all the time. But I say it just in case they don't."

Mr. Rod, 45, has been at Kailua Intermediate for 10 years — the first six as a special education teacher. For the past four years, he has run the school's

Solution Center, which is how the campus deals with behavior and academic problems. Instead of being sent to the blue chairs outside of the main office to wait for unilateral punishment, when a kid gets in trouble, they go to Mr. Rod and together, they talk it out and come up with a plan to remedy the situation. He deals with students — he calls them his clients — one-on-one, but also visits classrooms and shares stories of his life.

“I tell them I was born in Iran, and I had a beautiful childhood, from age 1 to 7.”

Then came the Iranian revolution, and his family’s life in Tehran became ruled by warning sirens, airstrikes and anti-aircraft fire that lit up the night sky.

“War teaches you many things,” he says. “The first thing it teaches you is patience. Every day, my mother and I would stand in line for bread. Stand in line for oil. Stand in line for everything.”

When he was in middle school — the same age as his clients — he left his war-torn homeland to live with his uncle in America.

Before his uncle agreed to take him, though, the first question he asked was, “What kind of grades is he making?” As Mr. Rod tells his students, he later appreciated the significance of his uncle’s question: If he wasn’t a good

student, what difference would it make if he came to America? He might as well stay in Iran and fight in the war.

“From that, I learned that education equals freedom,” he says.

He spent his teenage years in Augusta, Ga., living with his uncle and cousins, studying English in a remedial class and seeing firsthand issues of race and discrimination. To illustrate, he holds out his arm. “I’m dark,” he says, pointing to his skin, “but not dark enough to be considered black.” He turns his arm over and points to the skin on the underside. “I’m light, but not enough to be white.” He found friends among a group of kids who loved heavy metal and didn’t care what he looked like.

“And to this day, I love Metallica,” he says.

It was in those early years of displacement and confusion that he set a goal for himself. “I said that by age 30, I’m going to all 50 states and then decide where I want to settle.” He couldn’t go back to Iran, he didn’t like Augusta, but he was determined to find a place that felt right. He achieved that goal when he came to Hawaii in 2001.

He got his undergraduate degree in political science at the University of Georgia and a master’s in international business at Saint Mary’s in Texas. He

went through a teaching program in Alaska and post-baccalaureate program at Brigham Young University- Hawaii to be able to teach in Hawaii.

After all that, he was 41 years old when he finally finished paying off his student loans. “That day, I was jumping and cheering in my classroom,” he says. Even so, he continues to live frugally. He doesn’t own a car, doesn’t eat out much and has possibly the oldest flip phone in existence.

He saves his money to travel the world — frugally, staying in hostels and hiking mountains — and just established a scholarship for students of Kailua Intermediate. Each year, he will give \$1,000 to one student who has finished high school, maintained a 3.5 GPA and is enrolled in an accredited college. This year, the scholarship is going to Harley Gagnon, who is graduating from Damien.

“She had to overcome obstacles before she even knew what obstacles were,” Mr. Rod says.

Mr. Rod has many stories — of his childhood in Iran, of coming to America, of traveling the country and traveling the world, and of his clients who he has encouraged to not only “do well” but to “dominate.”

“I was directly in charge of 54 special education kids during my time as a classroom teacher,” he says. “In one of those years, during one quarter, all 18 students made the honor roll, which is 3.5 or above.”

“I tell the students, ‘How many of you have been told to dream?’ All the hands go up. And then I say, ‘I’m here to stomp on dreams. ‘Dream’ is one of the most misused words in the English language. Goals are more useful than dreams. Goals come with a plan and steps and a date by which you have to complete something. Have goals.’”