



Coach strives to be the best in memory of his son

By Dave Reardon

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It would have been so easy for Greg Lum Ho to just give up. No one would have blamed him, no one would have thought any less of him.

How could they?

When his son, Maka, 16, died in a kayaking accident in 2011, Greg was as devastated as any father would be. Perhaps more.

Maka was this kind of kid: When his father went on military deployment to Afghanistan he told Greg, "Don't worry, Dad. I'll be the man of the house."

He was 8.

"He knew his role had changed, and he had to be especially good to take care of his mom (Imelda) and everyone else (sister Ashley and brother Kahaku), and you could see the change," Greg recalls. "The best part was the day I got home a year later, when he realized he could be a kid again, and that's what he did."

So the fatal accident six years ago when Maka was a high school athlete at Keaau lettering in basketball, tennis and cross country spurred Greg on to even greater levels of selflessness as a coach and parent — levels so high that he is among 50 national winners this year of the Positive Coaching Alliance's Double-Goal Coach Award.

Lum Ho, Hawaii PCA Coach of the Year David Ishii and national finalist Kyle Smith were to be honored today at a breakfast celebration at the Pacific Club.

"Coach Greg is the kind of person you want your kids to be with because he believes in them," PCA-Hawaii executive director Jeaney Garcia says. "He inspires and motivates with love in his heart and really makes kids feel like they can do anything."

Greg says continuing to coach keeps Maka's spirit alive.

“Honestly, I think it’s more the kids who helped me get through it than the other way. I see them doing something that Maka would’ve done, like help another kid with homework, make the extra pass in basketball, or slow down to help a fellow cross country runner who has a cramp. That’s what keeps Maka alive. I could’ve easily said I’m done coaching after the accident. But that’s what keeps Maka alive.”

Damien Packer, who just completed his senior year as a University of Hawaii football player, was with Maka the day of the accident. He and other friends did what they could, but could not save him.

Damien went on to walk on to the Rainbow Warriors. He was moved from position to position and finally earned a scholarship and a home at strong safety. Maka, whose No. 21 he wore, was a daily inspiration for him, as was Greg.

“Coach Greg is a great example of perseverance for everyone in the community of Puna and the Big Island,” said Damien, who is training for a chance to play in the CFL and plans to eventually return to teach and coach at Keaau. “What happened with Maka hurt everyone a lot, but we know it hurt him the most. It was good to see him attack the bull by the horns and not shy away. That positive impact is the best example we could’ve gotten. He could’ve easily hung it up but he’s still constantly motivating everyone, staying in touch.”

Move to Hilo

Greg works full-time with the National Guard, a staff sergeant with 24 years in the Air Force and Army. The Lum Ho family moved from Pearl City to Hilo in 2000 because it would be easier to afford to buy a home.

“I love it, it’s the best move I ever made,” he says.

The area’s affordable housing market is a double-edged sword, though. The Puna area which Keaau serves battles a reputation for drugs and poverty.

“We get the bad rap out there,” Greg says. “But there’s a different side that the coaches might be helping them with. All of these kids aren’t going to go on in sports, but they are going on in life and that’s what we have to prepare them for. We tell them that they keep doing the right things people will eventually notice. There’s a lot of good out there. They’re representing a community, not just themselves. We tell them you just gotta be a little better.”

When Greg notices that a Keaau athlete doesn’t have parents show for games, he becomes the surrogate.

“When they’ve got a game in another sport I don’t coach, like volleyball, I make a point to show up. For a lot of them, it’s an economic situation. The parents have to work, or take care of other siblings. Situations happen.”

Athletic role model

At age 50, he stays fit by competing in spartan races. He has also completed 21 marathons and a 31-mile race.

“I figured if I can do crazy things like that then these kids have something to look up to,” Greg says.

He says everyone at the athletic department at Keauu is as dedicated as he is.

“Any one of us could’ve gotten it. It just happens that my name is on that certificate.

“There are days you don’t want to go to the gym. Then you get there, one of the student-athletes comes up, gives you the biggest smile, and says, ‘How are you, Coach?’ Then I wonder ... what was I mad about?

“It keeps you wanting to come back for more.”