



Laurence J. Capellas

*Interviewed by Warren Nishimoto (1991)
Narrative edited by Cynthia Oshiro*

Laurence J. Capellas was born in 1913 in Hakalau to two Hawai'i island school-teachers. After attending Hakalau School, St. Mary's School in Hilo, and St. Louis College in Honolulu, he went on to the University of Hawai'i Teachers College, graduating in 1935.

Capellas taught vocational agriculture at Waimea High School on Kaua'i for eight years before being appointed principal of Pā'auhau School on Hawai'i island in 1943. In succeeding years, he served as principal of Pa'auilo Elementary and Intermediate, Pāhala High and Elementary (later renamed Ka'ū High and Pāhala Elementary), and Hilo High schools. In 1966, he joined the Hawai'i island district office as a secondary curriculum specialist.

After completing a forty-two-year career in the Department of Education, Capellas served as president and chairman of the Hawai'i County Economic Opportunity Council. He also served on the boards of the Hawai'i Education Association and the Hawai'i State Retired Teachers Association.

He and his wife, Elsie Schumacher Capellas, raised two sons.

Hakalau

My father [Eugene S. Capellas] was principal of Hakalau School, and my mother [Eliza Reis Capellas] was a homemaking teacher. There were nine of us [LC was the fifth-born], plus a cousin, an aunt, and a nephew who lived with us.

We lived in the principal's cottage in Hakalau, and as our family grew, they kept adding on and adding on to that same house until finally it was housing fourteen people.

I took care of the [family] garden, and we had chickens, of course, and I would raise one or two pigs a year. Whenever we killed a pig, [Mother] explained to us about the heart and the lungs and how they operated, and the spleen, all the different parts.

My dad and mother both taught school for forty-nine years and would have made their fiftieth except that the war [World War II] was on and my dad wanted to retire and run for the [territorial] senate. He served forty-two years of his career as principal of Hakalau School.

He believed in education as the most precious thing that you can give to your children. All of us, except two of my sisters [and a brother]—six of the nine anyway—ended up in the field of education.

I think that our family, especially the three boys, suffered a lot more than the other kids in school when it came to corporal punishment. And if some kid was paddled or scolded by my dad and the kid was bigger than I, this boy would pick a fight with me after school. I had to form my own gang for protection.

The entire [Hakalau Plantation Company] sugar plantation was my territory or turf. For example, maybe on a day which was a holiday, in the morning I might be having

breakfast at some Japanese boy's home, and then maybe lunchtime we'd be at some Hawaiian boy's home, and then in the evening maybe we'd be down in the Spanish Camp where they were making homemade soup and Spanish bread in stone ovens.

I remember as a kid, with my gang, we used to get in all kinds of trouble, but not necessarily of a destructive nature. For example, the plantation [workers] would cut sugarcane, and they had mules to pull their cane cars up to where the cane was stacked. At the end of the day they'd leave the cane cars up at the tops of a hill, wherever they were cutting cane.

In the evening, especially on a moonlit night, we'd go up and we'd take the brake off the cane car, and we'd go riding down to the bottom of the hill, jump off and go back up for another cane car.

We [also] would jam the flumes, especially the main flume, where all the cane was coming in [to the mill] from different fields. The cane would then back up and the mill would have no cane to grind. Then we'd hide in the cane field and the *lumas* [overseers] would come up on their horses, swearing, looking for us.

Hakalau School only went up to the eighth grade. I skipped the fifth grade, so when I finished the [eighth] grade, I was only twelve years old, and it made it very difficult for me to go to high school at that early age. You had to take an examination to go on to Hilo Intermediate School. Those who didn't pass usually went to work on the plantations. I thought I should repeat the eighth grade under a different program, and selected St. Mary's School [a parochial school] in Hilo.

To save money to help with educational costs, I worked on Saturdays on the plantation. When we first went to work,

at age twelve, we got fifty cents a day, and we worked ten hours. That's five cents an hour!

They called that [job] *huki lepo*, where you pull the weeds and the grass all up [at] the base of the cane, using a hoe. As I got older I cut seed [cane], *pulapula* they called that. And then later on I worked with mules. I had pack mules with which we would move flumes.

Later I became a water boy, which was a prized job. (Laughs) You didn't have to work with a *luna* standing over you. I'd have to take water to the [laborers]. At that time, there were streams that were not polluted on both sides of the cane fields. And there were springs, too, in different places. I had a pole and two buckets. And then you had a long guava stick, at the end of which there was a can to make a dipper.

The hard part about being a water boy is you had to carry all the [laborers'] *bentōs*, or the lunch pails, from one place to the other.

Honolulu

I had graduated from the tenth grade of St. Mary's [School]. I wanted to go to St. Louis College¹ [for high school], because my brother had gone there. It was 1929 when I went up there to school. Of course, in those days, to go to Honolulu, we'd travel steerage. They were all like the *Hualālai*, they're medium-sized boats [i.e., inter-island steamers]. It only cost us seven dollars each way. And those days, when you got to Honolulu you could catch a trolley for ten cents. So from the wharf [i.e., Honolulu Harbor] up to St. Louis [College], that's all it cost.

St. Louis doesn't have a boarding department now, but then they did. I played on the boarders' basketball and bare-foot football [teams]. I was on the St. Louis track team.

[Capellas graduated from St. Louis in 1931 and began attending the University of Hawai'i that fall.]

I wanted to become a veterinarian. But while I was a sophomore at the university, my mother became ill, and so I had to forget about that and go into teaching. Since I had most of the courses that were needed to go into vo-ag [vocational agriculture], I decided I better try that field.

There were no jobs. It was during the [Great] Depression. [In the summer of 1934] I started digging cesspools for the County [of Hawai'i]. So when I graduated from the University of Hawai'i [in 1935], I figuratively had my diploma in my back pocket and I was digging cesspools!

Waimea

Out of the eleven graduates in our vocational agriculture class, I was the first one to be hired. In June [1935], I started the ag [program] in Waimea, Kaua'i.

I had to recruit a class who would be the nucleus of those taking vocational ag. During that first summer these

students worked with me on the [sugar] plantation [i.e., Waimea Sugar Mill Company]. I [also] took about eleven or twelve kids who would be labeled MRE now, mentally retarded kids. They agreed to help at the school farm. In exchange, the ag students tutored them.

The Waimea High agriculture farm was set up on plantation property under an agreement between the plantation manager and me. And he and I, together, borrowed \$1200 to buy all the fencing and plumbing supplies, and materials to build the pigpens,

The farm had to make a profit. We used the money [from the sale of produce] for our ag students to go on excursions and to attend conventions. We paid students who worked on Saturdays and Sundays,

We worked on Saturdays and Sundays because of the size of the school farm. The piggery had about thirty breeding sows. We had about 1,000 birds [i.e., chickens] and 200 ducks. And we had a small orchard, and we produced vegetables on about four acres of prime land.

Every Saturday morning, [the produce would be sold]. On Friday afternoon we'd take two pigs to market. We had taken orders during the week for Saturday delivery. We sold turkeys and chickens that we dressed.

There was income also from two sugarcane contracts. We harvested one field this year and then harvested the other field the next year. The kids would fertilize, weed, and irrigate the cane.

Being an ag teacher, I was paid twenty dollars more per month than regular teachers because we worked twelve months a year, making my total salary \$140 a month. In the beginning I got ten dollars additional in the form of car allowance.

When [World War II] broke out, I was given a 4F rating. When I tried to get into the armed services—although I had a wife and two kids—the only place that would take me was the [U.S. Coast Guard]. All they were going to do, I found out later, was to give me a uniform and I would do the same thing I was doing as a volunteer in the home guard. We concluded that I could be serving the government more profitably as a civilian.

One of my duties was [to] visit farms [on Kaua'i] to see whether they actually needed to be buying imported feed for their livestock. I would approve the amount of feed that they could buy and ask them to market surplus animals and birds that were not producing.

During the war, we were hauling garbage—or slop or whatever you want to call it—from the army camps around there, which helped. Our pigs were really fat and so was the big watchdog that we had down on the farm.

[At the time], I only had a four-year teaching certificate. So I had to save my vacation days to go to summer school every third year. It took me three summers to get my fifth-year certificate.

When I was in Honolulu in my last summer to get my fifth-year certificate, I ran into one of the district superintendents, and he told me, “Hey, Larry. A DPI [Department of Public Instruction] committee is doing interviews this week. They’re looking for principals.”

I said, “Ah, I don’t want to be a principal. I’m happy where I am, even though I work twelve months.”

He told me, “No, no, go ahead, just for fun.” And he was one of those people screening. Webling was his name, Gus Webling. He was the district superintendent in Honolulu.

I must have [passed], because in August [1942], I got a letter from the school department offering me ‘Ulupalakua School [on Maui], which made me laugh because my dad had [once] been [principal] there. But I couldn’t go because we had such a big farm program going [at Waimea High School] and a very active Future Farmers [of America] set up.

[Then] the DPI sent a young UH ag graduate [to Waimea]. He worked with me the whole school year, 1942–43. So then I felt free to leave Kaua‘i.

Pā‘auhau

The DPI offered me Pā‘auhau School [on Hawai‘i island]. Pā‘auhau was strictly [a] sugar plantation [community]. This was that old Scotch type of operation near the Hāmākua Coast.²

To accept the principalship meant that I would leave in August. The war was still on, 1943. I didn’t want to leave, because my wife was from Kaua‘i and my two boys were born there. But my family was over here [on Hawai‘i island] and my father had some property in Honomū, about thirty acres, which I was interested in buying and farming.

We only had seven on the [school] staff, including the kindergarten teacher, and me. I had to do the payroll for the teachers, the cafeteria reports, bank the money, and all kinds of other “dogcatcher” jobs.

That community was really interesting, because the kids there, the boys and the girls, were playing hopscotch. (Laughs) I got the boys to play touch football—of course, it wasn’t always touch. I also taught them how to play basketball.

Being a teaching principal, I was in charge of the seventh-grade class. I pushed those kids to the limit as far as their education was concerned and tried all kinds of novel ways to teach them. We’d use mental arithmetic, different types of art. For the first time the school had a May Day program, but a Hawaiian-type May Day program. We taught them some Hawaiiana.

Pa‘auilo

So from Pā‘auhau, they sent me to Pa‘auilo School³ [in 1944]. The Second World War was still on. I heard that the community wanted to make some changes at the school. I talked it over with my family and we decided to move.

They didn’t have a kindergarten until I got there and then I got one going. The [plantation] manager’s wife helped get it started. In fact, I think the plantation manager’s son and my son attended kindergarten in Pa‘auilo. The plantation carpenters made all the furniture and most of the items that we needed for a kindergarten.

When I was at Pa‘auilo, the school burned down on a Sunday. The whole school went down, except for three classrooms. I was having lunch with the [territorial] auditors. I had gone to school with some of them. We were sitting down eating lunch, and I’ll be darned, the school started to burn. I think it was faulty wiring.

Within one week we did start school. We had four classes going in the plantation gymnasium. The Japanese[-language] school had a building, and they gave us the four classrooms to use. The basement of the Buddhist church housed our kindergarten. The Episcopalians loaned us their hall, which wasn’t very big. The Filipino association loaned us their hall. The cafeteria was set up in another building. It was actually the basement of a classroom. So we⁴ were able to prepare food.

Then the county came out and put up some canec⁵ buildings in a hurry.

Ka‘ū

[In 1946] the manager at Pāhala [sugar plantation] at that time, Jack Ramsey, who was a good friend of my dad, insisted that the DOE [Department of Education, formerly the Department of Public Instruction] send me there [to be principal of the school], which, in a way, was a good thing, because I worked well with plantation people and we had good rapport.

While I was there, we changed the name from Pāhala School to Ka‘ū High [School]. But the Pāhala people, being very proud, didn’t want to give up the name Pāhala. So they insisted that the name be “Ka‘ū High and Pāhala Elementary [School],” which was kind of funny, but the Board of Education bought that idea.⁶

It was all the way from first grade through the twelfth. The youngsters came from Nā‘ālehu⁷ and Pāhala to the high school section. There was a lot of rivalry between those two plantations. I guess that was the way they got more sugar per acre. The managers got after the employees, starting the real rivalry, which in a way made it more difficult to run the school when you had kids from two communities that were always competing. On the other hand, it also gave them a reason to try harder, to show that their community was tops.

When I got there, I ran into other problems. The ILWU [International Longshoremen’s & Warehousemen’s Union] was getting ready for a strike. You know, the 1946 strike.⁸ And so the unions were trying to stir up anti-plantation [management] sentiment. The trouble there was that the manager [Jack Ramsey of Hawaiian Agricultural Company, Ltd.] was such a nice guy, they really didn’t want to picket him.

While they were on strike, I got the union [members] to come up and help us at the school, the carpenters and so forth. There was an unused boxing ring. We cut up the boxing ring and we set up a portable stage, a platform running up to the main stage.

All of the elementary playground equipment was up near the high school now, because we had exchanged buildings. We got the plantation to loan us bulldozers, and over the weekends we [built] a brand-new playground for the elementary kids. The fellows who were plumbers and so forth came up and helped us install the metal-pipe swings.

When I first went there, we had, I think, twenty-one teachers. About eighteen of my staff were Mainland people and people who had come in from O'ahu or someplace else. So we had to kind of build camaraderie. We worked together that way because we were isolated way out there. It was difficult to get into Hilo. We didn't have that nice highway now going all the way from Ka'ū.

One big problem was that our commercial buses cost so darned much money to rent. At that time we had to finance many things ourselves. We bought surplus buses and had them remodeled and repainted. We then had buses to take our students into Hilo, to the Volcano area on excursions.

We ran summer school for the elementary students. We got the youngsters who had a lot of reading problems and we got teachers to volunteer. At that time, we didn't have a teachers' union. So teachers did not mind helping with these youngsters on their own time.

We added a kindergarten [class], which was another new thing. We got Kapāpala School closed and used their buildings. We got the teachers and the plantation head carpenter to help us draw the plans for a different type of classroom. It's still standing; it's still being used.

I laugh now because they're talking about the schools being more independent. I was a pretty independent guy. In fact, my district superintendent told me, "You know, Larry, you keep bending that school code, and one of these days you're going to break it. I'm going to get you!" That was said in a friendly manner, of course.

We tried a lot of innovative things. I believe that if somebody gets an idea, don't discourage him. A science teacher comes to me with some idea or English teacher comes to me with some idea, go ahead! And we'd help. We used our PTA [Parent-Teacher Association]. We worked as kind of a community team. They call it today the school-base program [i.e., school/community-based management]. We were already doing that. It's nothing new.

Hilo

I was offered [the principalship of] Hilo High School [by district superintendent Ralph Kiyosaki in 1959]. I had to first get acquainted with the whole school. And the best

thing is to first get to know your secretary and get to know your vice principals, and your custodians, and your cafeteria manager.

That was a rough year [1959–60], because 1960 had the tsunami. We had the lava [flow] down Kapoho, which wiped out Kapoho School.⁹ And Pāhoa was having a hard time.

[Meanwhile], I had a student strike. A small group set the whole thing up. Hilo High still allowed hazing. A girl came in my office, somebody had taken an egg and smashed it on her permanent. Some upperclassmen [were] trying to get this sophomore girl to push a peanut with her nose. The bell rang, and the kids didn't go back to their classes.

I went into my office, got on the PA system, and told the kids that they had not followed the rules that we had set, and so they were all to go back to their classrooms, that the hazing was over.

Well, the kids that started the strike—they had already called the newspaper. I told the kids I wanted each class to send their representatives to the conference room. When they got there, I talked to them. [Schools superintendent] Ralph Kiyosaki talked to them; Dr. Goo [of the school board] talked to them. We agreed that we weren't going to have that kind of nonsense.

I told the [students] that if any of them had any ideas, send somebody up to my office to talk to me.

So I guessed it was a time to make some changes in the school. Some teachers, some department heads, who were more or less leaders in the school, were getting new books all the time. We organized our faculty and set up a curriculum committee. The curriculum committee would now make the decision as to whether they needed new science books, new English books, and so forth.

Then we talked about some of the courses that we had that we should change, drop; some new course that we could bring in. So as a result, while I was there at Hilo we dropped about thirty of the courses that we had and instituted courses that were more adaptable to the changing times.

In Ka'ū, you could always depend on the plantation in case the county would not bother too much with you. But in Hilo, you didn't have a plantation, you had many plantations. So we reorganized. I believed in a strong PTA, and a strong alumni. We got 900 parents to join Hilo High School for the first time.

I believe that if you can explain to your legislators what's what, [you can get their support]. You take the PTA president and the Hilo High School alumni president [with you]. The PTA gave us some money. So we took the legislators to dinner, we lay the cards on the table, and got [more] funding for the school.

We got money to construct a brand-new library and a brand-new cafeteria, a new band room, and a new ag and art building, because those were the worst buildings on the campus.

The first year I was there, I tried to get a carnival going to start a swimming-pool fund. I figured, Hilo, you surely ought to be able to—with that many people—get a swimming pool. We raised \$9,000. The teachers and the staff signed a petition—I think eighty-some-odd signatures—telling me, “No more carnivals, please!”

I laughed to myself. I said, “That’s okay.”

Well, in the meantime, Mrs. Carlsmith heard that we had tried to raise money for the swimming pool. I explained to her why we needed it. I said, “We don’t have a lot of big kids, but maybe our kids can learn how to swim, and the better swimmers, maybe they can get scholarships.”

And so she said, “I tell you what, when can you go with me to see John Dykes?” John Dykes was head of a trust [company] in Hilo, First Trust [Company of Hilo, Ltd.].

I said, “I’ll go right now.”

[At the meeting], in his Scotch brogue, [John Dykes] says, “Well, laddie, Mrs. [John M.] Ross¹⁰ has some stock in Honolulu Oil. Her husband bought it for five dollars a share, and now it’s worth about seventy to seventy-five dollars a stock. We understand that you need money for a swimming pool. Well, how much do you need?”

I told him, “The Ka’ū High School swimming pool cost about \$60,000. Maybe if we can get about, oh, \$90,000 then we can build a little bigger one in Hilo.” He said, “I’ll talk to the members of the trust who are handling her money, and I’ll let you know. Come back on Thursday.” So Thursday I was right there. He told me, “Well, we agreed that we can give you the money.”

I went down to the county building department, public works. I knew a fellow there who used to do some drawings for us. He [is] a Hilo High School graduate. So he drew up the plans.

That pool can hold 2500 students on the bleachers. It’s all concrete. And it’s got steel beams and thick pipe. I don’t know how many hundreds or thousands of kids have learned how to swim there. So it’s really been a godsend.

Hawai’i district office

In 1966, along with Bob Omura of the University [of Hawai’i], we wrote two projects for students. One was for intermediate school students who were potential dropouts. It was called Hukilike. *Huki* in Hawaiian is to pull, and *like* is everybody [i.e., together]. We figured that the parents pulling together with kids and the teachers could end up helping the kids.

Another project that we wrote up was Holomua. And there were federal funds for that. *Holomua* in Hawaiian means to forge ahead and to try to achieve your best in whatever you’re doing. The idea of that [was] that it would be based on the concept of community education. For example, if a girl says she wants to be a nurse, we could then give her a chance to visit the Hilo Hospital and have her

actually work with a registered nurse, to learn as an observer what is involved in such a career.

I was really interested in trying to get federal funds for all our schools to help kids. The DOE asked me if I would leave Hilo High—that was my seventh year [there]—and handle all the federal programs for the district. I was also to handle vocational-technical education, and also the project for underachieving youngsters. I was working with Title I programs. I [even] had something to do with the cafeterias, because we had a large amount of surplus federal food coming in.

Under Title I, we developed a project over in Kona, which we called Operation Live-in, which received national recognition. These kids lived in Miloli’i. They had to change buses about four times just to get to Konawaena [School]. By the time they got to school, they were half asleep. We took the two-classroom building [at ‘Ala’ē School] and we converted one part of it to a library and a study and the other part into a dormitory for the boys. These were only kids about third grade, fourth grade, fifth grade, up to eighth grade.

We used VISTA [Volunteers in Service to America] workers. We also had a VISTA worker over on the girls’ side in a teachers’ cottage. Right across the street we had the *kupuna* [elder] idea, where this couple came down and helped with the kids and told them Hawaiian legends and gave them love and comfort. We got the kids to go to the dentist and tried to see that they got a better diet. The kids had a garden.

Most of the parents were fishermen. We brought the parents up from Miloli’i and taught them how to cook low-fat foods and taught them how to sew. We got the youngsters to learn quite a bit, and their parents did, too.

Retirement

I retired in ’77, but I still stayed on in the general field of education. I was with the Hawai’i County Economic Opportunity Council as president and board chairman. It’s a non-profit, quasi-public community-action program. The low-income, handicapped, and elderly are covered by twenty-eight projects run by a staff of 140.

Some of the projects and the ideas that I had as a school administrator, we were using there and are still using. Last year, for example, we had a hundred kids in our dropout program in the Hilo area. We hire our own counselors, we have our own teachers, and we work with these kids. And out of that hundred referrals, ninety-eight kids stayed in school or came back to school, and, more important, finished the year.

I believe in giving the local kids a chance to move. They’ve got the brain power.

I believe that you can do anything that you want to. You got to realize that, for example, if you’re digging a tunnel, you’re going to hit a big rock, okay. That’s going to be one of the things that you’re going to have to conquer. Because you’re going to hit some more rocks and some more rocks,

but at the end you'll get through, and you'll see the light at the end of the tunnel.

I had a girl come in my office once at Hilo High School. Because she had had a fight with her boyfriend and with her parents and everything else, she tried to take pills to kill herself.

I said, "How old are you?"

She says, "Fifteen."

I said, "I'm sixty. I've been in this world four times as long as you. I would be happy to exchange with you. You take my place, you take my salary." I talked to her for a long time.

She finally graduated from school. Maybe I had a little bit to do with it. If I see her on the street now, with her kids and all, she always [says], "How are you Mr. Capellas?"

I think she realizes as she gets older that that rock is nothing compared to life itself.

ENDNOTES

¹ Today known as St. Louis School, a Catholic high school in Honolulu.

² Pā'auhau Sugar Company, as well as other sugar plantations along the Hāmākua Coast, imported managers and skilled workers from Scotland.

³ Also located on the Hāmākua Coast

⁴ Hawaiian Agricultural Company, Ltd. was the name of the sugar plantation in Pāhala.

⁵ Canec was a cheap building material made in Hawai'i from sugarcane stalks treated with arsenic and used in the early to middle decades of the twentieth century.

⁶ The name change was probably the result of the Territorial Board of Education's attempt to broaden the school's community reach. Ka'ū is the name of a district on Hawai'i Island; while Pāhala is the name of a town in that district.

⁷ Hutchinson Sugar Plantation Company

⁸ The 1946 sugar strike, the first by sugar laborers represented by the ILWU, lasted seventy-nine days.

⁹ Lava from the January 1960 eruption of Kīlauea destroyed the entire village of Kapoho.

¹⁰ Her husband was manager of Hakalau Plantation Company.
