

# A certified living treasure



Benjamin B. Young, MD. Courtesy National Library of Medicine

## George C. Bolian, MD

Dr. Bolian is Professor of Psychiatry, Emeritus, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN.

**H**awai`i no ka oi! Hawai`i is a special place, and, it is home to some incredibly special people.

I had the very good fortune to serve a three-year tour of military duty from 1962–1965 at Tripler Army Medical Center in Honolulu, Hawaii. There, I encountered a true doctor's doctor, Robert H. Moser, MD (AΩA, Georgetown University School of Medicine, 1969) as Chief of Medicine. I interacted professionally with Colonel Moser on a regular basis, but, far more important, he became my friend. We were both members of a small group of military physicians and their spouses who met at least monthly. Our excuse for meeting was to discuss our various opinions and interpretations of some book we had all agreed to read. In truth, we simply enjoyed each others company.

It was in that setting that I came to know and deeply admire Bob Moser. He was thoughtful, forthright, and remarkably insightful. His dedication to his profession was intense. Sadly, he is no longer with us, but I remember him with fond affection.

Through a series of coincidental events in the lives of Bob Moser and Benjamin B. Young, their medical careers became intertwined in such a way that made an indelible impact on health care in Hawai`i, and throughout the Pacific basin.

## Benjamin B. Young

It was in my first job as Director of Residency Training in Psychiatry at the University of Hawai`i that I initially encountered Benjamin B. Young, MD (AΩA, John A. Burns School of Medicine University of Hawaii, 1981, Faculty), a first year resident and freshly minted graduate of Howard University College of Medicine. On meeting Ben, both then and now 50 plus years later, the first thing that attracts one is his smile. Ben's smile conveys a sense of warmth and authenticity that disarms even the most casual conversationalist, let alone those who may be anxious or paranoid.

Ben came from a family of modest means, the youngest of nine children. His father was a janitor at Hickam Air Force Base, and his mother was a domestic worker. When Ben was in first grade, his father suffered a stroke that left

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him permanently disabled and homebound. Ben often said, "It was my father who strengthened in me the meaning and spirit of Aloha."

During World War II, after work, Ben's father would catch the bus from Hickam to Honolulu. On the way, he met many young, lonely soldiers who were stationed in Hawaii and far from home. Without hesitation, he would invite these young soldiers to dinner, often to the surprise and chagrin of his mother. For Ben, generosity of spirit became a foundation stone of his character, and of his identity.

School years passed quickly for Ben. During his final year in high school, he began making plans to go to work for Dole Pineapple. At that juncture, however, a young minister by the name of Carl Clarke intervened. He inspired Ben to pursue a college education. He also contacted a friend who was the college president, and arranged for Ben to attend Kentucky Christian College in Grayson, Kentucky, a small school of about 400 students. Ben had no money, but he was accepted on the condition that he work on the college farm. After two years, he transferred and graduated from Milligan College in Tennessee with a degree in English literature. Perhaps his greatest achievement at Milligan was to meet, woo, and win the heart of DeDe, his wife, and the mother of their three children.

The young couple moved to California where Ben pursued further education, including pre-med, at Pepperdine University. In due course, he was admitted to the Howard University College of Medicine from which he ultimately graduated as their first, and only Native Hawaiian to receive a medical degree. It was not the first, nor would it be the last time he received recognition as the "first" or "only" Hawaiian.

Those years at Howard were formative in many ways. It was an era of intense social and racial unrest, frequently punctuated by riots and even assassinations. Several of his own classmates had marched and demonstrated with Martin Luther King, Jr. The injustice of racial inequities was deeply impressed upon Ben, and it is probably fair to speculate that he pondered these things in his heart.

Ben Young pondered his options and elected to return to his native homeland, Hawai'i. He chose the specialty area of psychiatry and became a first-year resident in the newly-organized program at the University of Hawaii under the leadership of Chairman John McDermott, MD (AQA, John A. Burns School of Medicine University of Hawaii, 1988, Faculty). Ben was outstanding, especially in the ways that matter most: empathic, totally devoted to the care of his patients, mature, bright, inquisitive,

and energetic. And once again, he was the only Hawaiian among his peers. Even more remarkable, he was informed that he was one of fewer than 10 Native Hawaiian physicians.

## Hawaiian physicians

This disparity of "supply and demand" had not escaped the attention of our fledgling physician. Far too many Hawaiians were poor and suffered from common diseases that went untreated. But they often felt alienated from a health care system poorly designed to meet their needs. Doctors, if available at all, were rarely equipped to appreciate the richness of their Hawaiian heritage and how that influenced their views on health and illness. But what was one lone Hawaiian doctor able to do to alter such a longstanding social and ethnic problem?

Upon completion of residency training, Ben was offered a rather unique position as a junior faculty member at the University of Hawai'i John A. Burns School of Medicine (JABSOM) and given the challenging task of increasing the numbers of Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders in medicine.

He soon expanded the mission beyond mere numbers by developing and opening opportunities for socially and economically less advantaged individuals who aspired to study medicine. The embodiment of this effort began with his creation of a new program called, "Imi Ho'ola," which translates as, "Those who seek to heal."

It was not an easy task, but a seemingly endless array of subsequent awards and formal recognitions attest to Ben's success throughout these years. Today, there are more than 400 Native Hawaiian physicians mainly due to Ben's recruitment and retention endeavors. Many were personally mentored by Ben and, as fate would have it, by Bob Moser.

As Dean of Students, Ben worked closely with Bob, by then a civilian, to establish a primary care preceptorship on the island of Maui. Many third-year JABSOM medical students were assigned to shadow Ben and Bob as an externship experience, an exposure which led numerous graduates to enter Primary Care.

Ever sensitive to history and tradition, Ben recognized the importance of learning firsthand about the suffering of patients who had been diagnosed with Hansen's disease (leprosy). He created a program for medical students and accompanied them traveling annually from Honolulu to the Hansen's Disease settlement of Kalaupapa, on the island of Moloka'i so students could learn about the impact of this condition on the history of Hawai'i. This annual trek continues to this day, providing an opportunity for future

physicians to meet and interact with patients still living on this isolated peninsula.

And, in accord with his initial charge, Pacific Islander graduates who came from faraway islands and atolls often returned to assume positions of medical leadership. On Palau, Stevenson Kuartei, MD, became Minister of Public Health and is now a Senator; Iotamu Saleapaga, MD, from American Samoa, served as Medical Director of the LBJ Medical Center; and Bryan Isaacs, MD, from Kosrae State in the Federated States of Micronesia, established and maintains a medical clinic in Pohnpei State.

In the United States Territory of Guam, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas, there are scores of indigenous Chamorros who regard Ben as their mentor and guide who led them to successful careers in medicine.



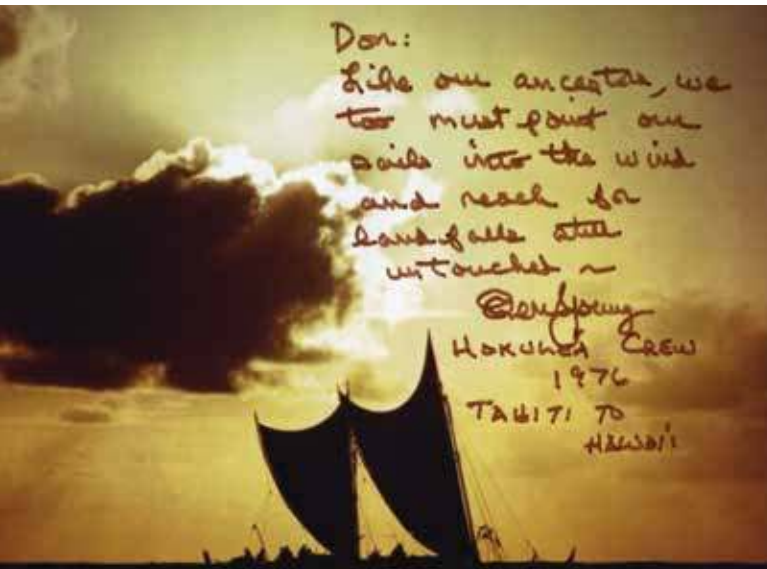
Benjamin B. Young, MD, and his wife DeDe.

on the return voyage. This event captured the hearts and interests of all Polynesian and Micronesian people and was a catalyst for what eventually became known as the Hawaiian Renaissance, thereby bringing forth an explosion of re-discoveries and revitalization of Hawaiian language, music, arts, and other elements so vital in cultural preservation.

Ben maintains his connections with Hōkūleʻa and its navigators, and had the honor of escorting the canoe into Honolulu's shore in June 2017 as it ended its three-year, 42,000 mile Malama Honua (Caring for the Planet) voyage around the world.<sup>1</sup>

Benjamin B. Young, MD, served as Dean of Students at the School of Medicine for 14 years, during which time he established the Alpha Omega Alpha Chapter in 1981.

Nationally, in 1987, Ben was elected as the Chair for the Group on Student Affairs of the Association of American Medical Colleges. Ultimately, he became the Vice President for Student Affairs at the University of Hawai'i, and then, for about 10 years, was the Director of the Native Hawaiian Center of Excellence at the University. Ben has received wide recognition and acclaim as reflected in awards far too numerous to mention. But the one that sums it up best is that of the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawai'i, a Buddhist organization in Hawaii. They bestow the Living Treasures of Hawaii recognition on individuals who demonstrate excellence in their fields and make significant contributions toward enriching society. Ben received this recognition and honor in 2005.<sup>2</sup> Benjamin B. Young, MD is, not only a Living Treasure of Hawai'i, but of all who seek to heal.



Hōkūleʻa returning from Tahiti, 1976, with inscription by ship's doctor Benjamin B. Young, MD. Courtesy Donald A.B. Lindberg, MD

### Honoring his ancestors

On that note, one might be tempted simply to end the story with the blare of a trumpet fanfare. To do so would risk missing the heart and soul of the man. In his younger years Ben was a member of a group of Hawaiians who built Hōkūleʻa (Star of Gladness), a double-hulled, ocean voyaging canoe true to ancient Polynesian design. The entire world took note when Hōkūleʻa and crew made the long, non-instrumental voyage from Hawai'i to Tahiti and back in 1976, using only the stars, moon, planets, cloud and wave patterns, and other signs from nature to navigate across the Pacific Ocean. Ben served as the ship's doctor

### References

1. Hawaii News Now, June 26, 2017. <https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=Hokulea&docid=608020043145020102&mid=171B19DD0B8604BC1D6D171B19DD0B8604BC1D6D&view=detail&FORM=VIRE>.
2. Honolulu Star Bulletin. "Living Treasures of Hawai'i" January 15, 2005.

The author's E-mail address is [george.bolian@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:george.bolian@vanderbilt.edu).