



▶ Northern Marianas Humanities Council

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# 2023

## ANNUAL REPORT



This publication has been made possible in part by a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities: Democracy Demands Wisdom. Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this feature do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities.



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The Council's partnership with American Samoa Humanities Council, Humanities Guåhan, and Hawai'i Council for the Humanities has proven effective in establishing the Pacific Islands Humanities Network (PIHN). The PIHN aims to create and maintain a networking forum to foster a culture of knowledge sharing and collaboration among Pacific Island councils and communities; amplify Pacific Islander community voices and perspectives in discussions on local and global issues, particularly with regard to cultural preservation and climate resilience; facilitate humanities capacity building and professional development opportunities for Pacific Islanders; and strengthen community engagement and outreach activities throughout the region and major Pacific Islander diasporas within the U.S. The PIHN provides resources and opportunities for members to meet in person and share information on regional issues related to the humanities. The PIHN focuses on the protection of culture and language, climate resilience planning for community-based efforts to safeguard cultural resources against the effects of climate change and developing partnerships with federal agencies and nonprofit organizations to support the region. This partnership allows the group to serve as a sounding board and provide feedback on how to better support new projects for each council. The PIHN's Convenings at the National Humanities Conference provides a space for other humanities professionals to engage with the Network and learn more about the Pacific Islander community and issues. PIHN is also slated to participate in the 2024 Festival of Pacific Arts & Culture, the largest gathering of Pacific Islander cultural practitioners in the region, to learn more about how this event might advance the work and interests of each PIHN member council.

## PARTNERSHIP SPOTLIGHT



## Program Partners

American Memorial Park  
American Samoa Humanities Council  
CNMI Public School System  
DB Media  
Department of Community & Cultural Affairs  
Seafaring Program  
Duty Free Shoppers (T-Galleria)  
Federation of State Humanities Councils  
Flame Tree TV and Production Company  
Guam Preservation Trust  
Guampedia  
Hawai'i Council for the Humanities  
Humanities Guåhan  
Integrity Communications  
Joeten-Kiyu Public Library  
Marianas Variety  
Micronesian Voyaging Society  
National Endowment for the Humanities  
NMI Museum of History & Culture  
Northern Marianas College Proa Publications  
Office of the Governor and Lt. Governor  
Office of the Mayor of Tinian and Aguiguan  
Pacific Coastal Research and Planning  
Pride Marianas  
Saipan Chamber of Commerce  
Saipan Tribune  
Satawal Island Community  
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Hafa Adai and Tirow:

The 2023 Annual Report for the Northern Mariana Islands Humanities Council highlights several successful projects and programs that were carried out this year. As the elected Chair of the Council for 2023, I am deeply grateful to our community and Council staff for their contributions to the success of these initiatives.

Every two years, the Council, in partnership with Humanities Guåhan, Guampedia, Guam Preservation Trust, Northern Marianas College, and University of Guam, hosts the Marianas History Conference, which showcases the research, publications, and ideas of community members, artists, scholars, and cultural practitioners. This year's theme, Healing the Wounds of History, explored how the Marianas has been both positively and negatively shaped by historical and contemporary changes. The Conference drew over 300 participants over the course of three days, and I anticipate that future conferences will continue to attract interest and engagement.

The Council is also working on an exciting film project documenting the Satawal Pwo Ceremony in Satawal Island. Council Director Leni Leon and Executive Director Leo Pangelinan, alongside Catherine Perry, Milton Coleman, Jr., Japheth (Pahonu) Coleman, and Captain Cecilio Raiukilipili journeyed to Satawal Island by boat to capture the experiences of a rare and significant traditional "pwo" ceremony. This ceremony focuses on inducting new navigators into Weriaeng, one of two remaining schools of traditional navigation in Micronesia. The documentary is a Council-led project that aims to preserve this cultural tradition in a modern medium and sharing it with the broader community. It's a unique way to bring traditional knowledge to the forefront and allow new generations to appreciate it.

In keeping with our commitment to youth engagement, the Council also continued to develop programs for younger generations. This year, the Council sponsored the second My Marianas Writing Contest, which offers high school students a platform to share narratives of their experiences in the Marianas. The theme for this year, Senses of Home, encouraged students to explore their sensory connections to the Marianas. Sixty-six students submitted personal and thought-provoking narratives, each of which was impressively composed.

As I reflect on 2023, I am mindful of the work still ahead for the Council to ensure the continued fulfillment of its vision and mission. While this is an ongoing journey, it is one that is both meaningful and impactful.

**Gretchen A. Smith**  
Chairperson, Northern Marianas Humanities Council

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## ACTIVITIES & OUTCOMES

# Annual Progress Toward Achieving Strategic Goals

### PRESERVING AND PROMOTING THE INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES AND CULTURE OF THE NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS.

The Council recognizes the importance and value of the Chamorro and Refaluwasch people in the context of the history and contemporary landscape of the Northern Mariana Islands (NMI). Each with their unique history and ancestral connection to these islands, these communities collectively represent the body politic in which the Covenant to Establish a Commonwealth of the NMI in Political Union with the United States of America was forged. The Chamorro and Refaluwasch people of the NMI endured centuries of foreign colonial domination within their homeland resulting in loss of life, intergenerational trauma, and systematic degradation of their unique customs, beliefs, and languages. The Council acknowledges this historical travesty and the desire and ongoing struggle within these communities to keep their ancestral languages and cultural heritage alive. Therefore, the Council aims to preserve and promote the indigenous languages and cultures of the Northern Mariana Islands as a strategic goal.

The Council produced *Island Time* to inspire pride and interest in learning the Chamorro cultural heritage and language among CNMI's youth. The 45-minute children's show features an eclectic array of cutting-edge, cinematic techniques to demonstrate both traditional and contemporary cultural practices, impart cultural values, highlight local folklore and music, feature local talent and cultural leaders, inspire cultural ingenuity and creativity, and introduce and reinforce the use of simple Chamorro words and phrases in relevant contexts. At the end of FY 2023, 187 people participated in *Island Time* film screening events organized by the Council and the film drew 6,118 views on YouTube.

The Governor's Humanities Awards is an annual program that recognizes outstanding contributions to the humanities in the areas of publication and scholarship, teaching, preservation of traditional cultural practices, and preservation of CNMI history. When appropriate, an individual is distinguished with an award for a lifetime commitment and dedication to one or more areas within the humanities. Award recipients recognized in 2023 included Señora Carmen Taimañao, an educator with decades of service in teaching, stewarding programs, and creating resources focused on the Chamorro language and culture. Milton Coleman, Jr., a traditional navigator and student of famed Grand Master Navigator Mau Piaiug, received an award for his outstanding contributions to perpetuating traditional seafaring traditions in Hawai'i and the CNMI and; Siñot Donald Mendiola was recognized with a Lifetime Achievement in the Humanities award for more than 30 years of service as a Chamorro and Carolinian Language and Heritage teacher in the CNMI Public School System, for his service to the CNMI and Guam community as a *suruhuanu* (traditional healer), and for perpetuating traditional weaving practices.

### DEVELOPING EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS IN LITERACY AND LANGUAGE

Literacy and language are essential to developing shared knowledge and critical thinking within a community. The Council supports the reflection of our individual and shared values and beliefs that lead to constructive discourse. The Council has made significant investments to support literacy projects and is committed to evaluating its current projects and providing more educational opportunities that support effective literacy and language programs.

The *My Marianas Writing Contest* provides high school students with an opportunity to write about their experiences and impressions of our islands and way of life through personal narrative essays. This year's contest theme, "Senses of Home", challenged students to provide vivid details that express their connection to the Marianas as "home" through one or more of their senses. Before the essay submission deadline, we hosted a writing workshop to provide an opportunity for prospective contestants to unpack the theme and hone their writing skills. A total of 66 student authors submitted an essay, many of whom received direct support from their language arts teachers with academic credit for their entries. The top 10 entries were published widely in print and online through local media platforms and the authors of the top 3 winning essays received cash prizes in recognition of their exceptional work.

### 2023 Governor's Humanities Award recipients:

Awardee	Category
Ajani Burrell	Publications and Scholarship in the Humanities
William Fife, III	Outstanding Humanities Teacher in a Classroom Setting
Carmen Taimañao	Outstanding Humanities Teacher in a Non-Classroom Setting
Deborah Fleming	Preservation of CNMI History
Milton Coleman, Jr.	Preservation of Traditional Cultural Practices
Donald Mendiola	Lifetime Achievement in the Humanities

In April 2023, the Council launched the *Satawal Pwo Ceremony* documentary film project with a team visit to Satawal Island for the purposes of conducting interviews and capturing film footage of a rare traditional "pwo" ceremony involving the induction of 16 navigators into Weriaeng, one of two remaining schools of traditional navigation in Micronesia. *Pwo* is a Satawalese word that means "to pound" and describes, in part, an intense process of teaching, learning, and spiritual cleansing that traditional navigators undergo throughout a four-day sequester in a traditional men's house. On the last day of the *Pwo* ceremony, the inductees emerge to rejoin the community as ordained pairoro, an official title conferred to navigators who complete the *Pwo*'s ceremonial protocols and pass a series of knowledge and skills tests in one or more areas of traditional navigational knowledge. The Council conducted interviews with the island's traditional leaders, event organizers, and inductees to support the preservation of this rare cultural practice and interpret the value of the ceremony for the people of Satawal and the Refaluwasch community in the NMI.

Between July 6-14, 2023, the Council organized high school student educational tours in conjunction with *Alingano Maisu*'s 2-week stopover on Saipan on its voyage back to Koror, Belau. The *Alingano Maisu* is a traditional double-hull sailing canoe operated by Belau's Micronesian Voyaging Society and Captained by Master Navigator Sesario Sewralur. The educational tours provided 290 CNMI students and community members with an opportunity to board the vessel and engage the captain and crew in stories and experiences of open ocean voyages between various Micronesian islands without modern navigational instruments.

### INCREASING PUBLICATIONS AND SCHOLARSHIP IN THE HUMANITIES

In March 2023, the Council distributed copies of *A Marianas Mosaic: Signs and Shifts in Contemporary Island Life* to CNMI schools, libraries, and repositories as part of a publishing partnership with Northern Marianas College and the University of Guam Press. The book features a collection of 20 essays, articles, and narratives from Marianas authors providing insight into the 'signs' of life and culture in our region and the 'shifts' throughout history that have shaped the world people of the Marianas live in today. A Book Launch at the NMI Museum of History and Culture on February 3, 2023, and the Meet the Authors event on February 4, 2023, provided initial exposure to the book's release under NMC's Proa Publications.

On December 22, 2023, the Council hosted *Memories of Saipan Under Japanese Rule: a Conversation with Kensei Kamiunten* with a limited audience to support Professor Yumiko Imaizumi and Dr. Elizabeth Rechebe's research into the perceptions of Micronesian and Japanese experiences during Japan's "Nanyo Gunto" rule in our region. Kensei Kamiunten's parents immigrated from Okinawa to Saipan in 1923 where he and four of his siblings were born. Kamiunten survived the WWII Battle of Saipan and led the Micronesian Repatriation Association of Okinawa in organizing visits to Micronesia to engage in cultural exchanges and conduct spirit-consoling services for the war dead.



## 2023 My Marianas Writing Contest Winners

Author	School	Essay Title
1st Jill Anne Mallari	Mount Carmel School	"Ocean, One Home"
2nd Dryllynne Joseph	Kagman High School	"The Scarred Knees"
3rd Brissa Hunter	Mount Carmel School	"Our Beaches Become Our Memories"

The *Valentine N. Sengebau Poetry Competition* is an annual event that celebrates the life and work of Palauan poet Valentine N. Sengebau, inviting junior and high school students from the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) to participate. In the junior division, junior high students memorize and interpret Sengebau's poems. In the senior division, high school students create and perform original works inspired by themes of identity, culture, and change. The competition took place on October 20, 2023, at American Memorial Park, where 20 emerging poets performed their recitations and compositions before a public audience.

## 2023 Valentine N. Sengebau Poetry Competition Winners

Junior Division		
Name	School	Poetry Title
1st Giana Lang	Dandan Middle School	"Ngedeloch"
2nd Mary Audrey Bansil	Dandan Middle School	"Ngak"
3rd Kalie Ann A. Kalen	Francisco M. Sablan Middle School	"Mirage"
Senior Division		
Author	School	Poetry Title
1st Yu Rong Jiang	Saipan Southern High School	"Reminders of Home"
2nd Ashley E. Cayabyab & Sayera A. Sidur	Dr. Rita Hocog Inos Jr./Sr. High School	"The Pacific's Lush Paradise"
3rd Fanai H. Staffler	Kagman High School	"Can You Weave?"

The Council hosted the *6th Marianas History Conference* at Crowne Plaza Hotel between September 1-3, 2023 with the theme, "Healing the Wounds of History." The first day featured a keynote address by Siñot Donald Mendiola, a respected *yo'åmti* (traditional healer), traditional weaver, Chamorro language and culture expert, and educator from Saipan. The second day featured a keynote address by Pale' Eric Forbes, a Capuchin priest with an avid interest and skill in historical research and writing about the Marianas and her people. The conference featured 47 sessions grouped concurrently by their connections to historical periods, themes, or subject matter. Experiential learning sessions scheduled on the last day of the conference provided participants with an opportunity to engage in place-based learning in the community which involved seafaring culture, traditional medicinal plants, exhibitions of Chamorro and Carolinian culture, and visits to historic heritage sites. A total of 328 people registered for the conference representing students, scholars, historians, and cultural practitioners from Saipan, Tinian, Rota, Guam, Hawaii, California, Oregon, New Mexico, Nevada, Arizona, North Dakota, Spain, and Puerto Rico. Conference proceedings, including video recordings of sessions, can be viewed at <https://guampedia.com>.

## PROMOTING DIVERSE EXPERIENCES AND PERSPECTIVES

The Council exhibited its Cultural Icons posters, the Garapan Heritage Trail, excerpts from original winning poetry from the *Sengebau Poetry Competition*, and select photos from our Digital Archive at T-Galleria as part of *Duty Free Shoppers Saipan's Marianas Experience*. The exhibit was featured between July 2023 – and August 2024 to showcase an eclectic array of public humanities programs giving visitors to our islands greater insight and connection to our diverse community, history, and way of life.

The Council collaborated with the University of Guam's master's in public administration Cohort from Saipan to produce *A Marianas Medley*, a community-centered event showcasing presentations and performances on stage to cover a range of humanities topics. The production demonstrated an innovative approach by students in promoting and preserving the epistemology of our first peoples and creating space for their voices as well as the stories and perspectives of other groups that call the Marianas home.

*Pride Talks* provides a public space for the NMI community to learn more about the experiences and perspectives of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer/questioning, intersex, and asexual/aromantic/agender (LGBTQIA+) community. This year's *Pride Talks* was held on Wednesday, June 21, 2023, and featured Dr. Bobby Cruz, Mark Sonoda, Zenn Tomokane, Patrick Arriola, Anicia Santos, and Roberto Santos as presenters. Each spoke in turn before a public audience at Queen's Hall, Kensington Hotel on the theme: "LGBTQIA+ voices and personal stories of navigating life in the Marianas".

Toward the end of the year, the Council launched a new film documentary project called *Service, Sacrifice, and Resilience: Guardians on the Front Lines*, funded in part by the Tan Siu Lin Foundation, to collect and preserve the stories, perspectives, and experiences of U.S. Armed Services veterans and first responders in our community. If you have members of your family or friends with a compelling story or experience while on duty or transitioning out of official duty, please let us know. We plan to publish interviews as a series under this project in 2024.

*Your Humanities Half-hour Show* featured 38 new episodes this past year documenting interviews with community members on a variety of humanities topics, including current research and perspectives of individuals engaged in cultural preservation and other local projects. The show titled, *Chamorro & Carolinian Death Rituals* featuring Malua Peter topped the charts as the most viewed episode on YouTube in 2023. YHHH 2023 is now featured on KSPN2 and various podcast platforms in addition to the show's broadcast on Power 99 Radio every Sunday at 11:30 am.

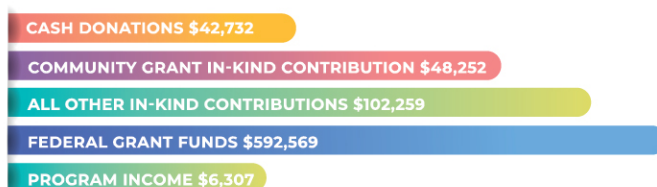
*Marianas Stories* is a Facebook Live broadcast of interviews with "ordinary people with extraordinary stories". The project featured 8 interviews featuring stories of open-ocean voyaging, hiking trails, cooking traditions, employment, and stories that have become part of theater performances.

## BUILDING COMMUNITY CAPACITY FOR PROJECTS TO THRIVE

The Council submitted a concept proposal for a Commonwealth Center for the Humanities facility under the CNMI Office of Planning and Development's Community Pillars program and was selected in November 2022 for inclusion in a grant award to develop the architecture and engineering plans for this facility. The Council's designs for this facility were recognized among other proposals as having the most innovative project plans. When completed, the Center would utilize technology and space to bridge communities, especially our youth, and man'åmku, in activities that preserve and promote the cultural heritages of our indigenous and diverse communities.

## FINANCIAL DATA

### FY 2023 REVENUE (\$792,119)



### FY 2023 COSTS (\$781,262)

