



## Aquatics director helps kids navigate life's rough waters

**G**rowing up in a rough, low-income area of San Diego, Omar Zaldana learned the best way to stay afloat was to, well, stay afloat.

Now the aquatics director at the Nuuanu YMCA, Zaldana, 31, draws from his early experiences to help kids in similar situations.

"I grew up in a gang neighborhood, and being involved with the YMCA was what kept me from selling drugs, lying, stealing and other things that people around me were doing," Zaldana said.

Zaldana has always loved the water. As a toddler, he and his family would go to the YMCA pool near their home. Years later, during a Boys and Girls Club field trip to the beach, Zaldana found an abandoned bodyboard. It may as well have been a million bucks.

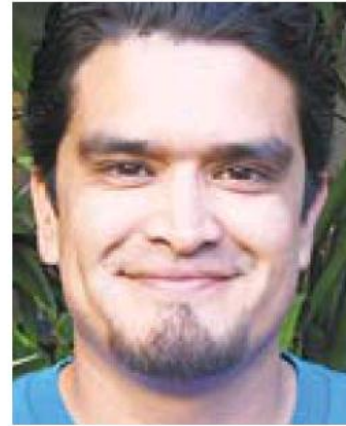
"It changed my life," he said. "My mom was a single parent, and we didn't have money for anything like that. I was super-stoked. Bodyboarding became my passion and my outlet."

Later still, at El Camino High School, Zaldana and his classmates benefited from a special program that provided busing to a nearby pool for formal swimming lessons.

As his swimming skills improved, Zaldana's opportunities seem to abound. At 15 he got a job as a lifeguard at Camp Pendleton. Later he got a job as a YMCA swim instructor, a gig he kept until 2008 when he moved to Hawaii.

At the Nuuanu YMCA, Zaldana has drawn from his early experiences to help kids from economically disadvantaged areas.

With \$10,000 from the Island Insurance Foundation, the YMCA has been able to offer transportation to a



**Omar Zaldana**

nearby facility and swim lessons at no cost to the students through its Swim Play and Learn Aquatic Safety Habits program.

Last year Zaldana worked with fourth- and fifth-graders from Kauluwela Elementary School. Early on, he noticed a boy who was going to have to sit out because he didn't have an appropriate pair of swimming trunks. Zaldana gave the kid one of the extra suits he keeps around just in case.

"For me," the boy said, "to keep?"

YMCA CEO and President Mike Broderick was on hand to see the exchange and relayed the story to fellow board members, one of whom cut a check for \$500 to buy suits and equipment for each child. Now Zaldana's young charges each get a pair of goggles, swim shorts and a rash guard (which does wonders in helping kids with body image issues get over their shyness).

Sometimes Zaldana looks at the kids, many of whom come from immigrant families, just like he did, and knows he's done well for himself.

"It's an honest living," he says. "We're giving these kids a chance to gain some skills and experience so that the next time they're presented with an opportunity, they'll feel confident about taking it. That's what makes me happy."