

BIG MAN on campus

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As you walk into the gym for basketball practice at Shoreline Community College, your attention is instantly drawn to a heavily tattooed 6-ft 8-in man working on his game at a nearby basket.

His fiery bright Hawaiian tattoos extend from neck to ankles, but are more than just for show; they represent a long journey.

Maika Usita, 21, was born in Laguna Beach, CA before moving to Maui, HI when he was a year old. He grew up with three women – his mom and two sisters – and without the support of his dad, who left the family when Usita was 3 years old. This forced Usita to help raise his two sisters Tehani and Kiara. But Usita says that raising two sisters was easy.

“There were difficult times, and times I wondered why my father couldn’t be there,” he said. “But it wasn’t that hard, and it was a great experience.”

Usita’s mother Ingrid, a native of Hawaii, is really polite and giving, but also strong.

“She won’t take no for an answer,” Usita said.

After Usita enrolled at Maui High School in 1999, he became an all-star football player, getting scholarship offers to play Offensive Line at Nebraska, Oregon State, and Hawaii. In his senior year of high school, however, he decided to try out for the basketball team and people had high expectations for him.

“Because I was so big, everybody expected that I would be a great sports player,” he said.

Unfortunately, Usita was cut from the basketball team.

“The coach didn’t want to take the time to teach me the game,” he said. “So when he cut me, I took it personal.”

People around the school started to talk about Usita being cut which didn’t sit well with the young man.

“Rumors were going around the school,” Usita recalls. “People [were] saying ‘Maika’s like the tallest kid in Hawaii, but he sucks at ball.’”

In the end, the pressure became too much to bear. As soon as he was cut from the team, he says he began doing drugs, and dropped out of school to get away from the problems.

“I was like screw school, I don’t want to have anything to do with this, screw everything,” he remembers.

He said he did drugs for three years and worried about becoming like his father because he had no

better role models. While he was working at Maui Community College as a security guard, Usita met Jason Pabelano. He saw Usita one day, and asked him if he played basketball. After that he began teaching Usita how to play.

“He told me how to play ball, and forget what everybody else thinks about me,” Usita said. “He made it fun.”

Pabelano suggested that Usita try out for basketball in college.

Usita searched the internet, found a college finder, and filled out a questionnaire asking about his needs. His main goals for college were to get his G.E.D., and play basketball. Initially, he wanted to try this at a college in Hawaii, but found there were too many distractions around him, so he decided to come to the Mainland to get his education.

“Pabelano left me with all this inspiration to go out and do something with my life,” Usita said.

The first college to come up was Tacoma Community College. Usita talked to the basketball coach there, and

the meeting went well. However, Usita wanted a college to fall back on, in case TCC didn’t work out. So he looked into SCC, and talked to coach Jeff Menday.

“[Menday] said don’t go to TCC,” Usita recalls. “He said come here to play ball, and get your G.E.D.”

A year later, Usita came to the Seattle area knowing no one. He moved in with three teammates, and began working at the issue room below the SCC gymnasium. Usita is still a student of the game of basketball, but appreciates the fact that Menday is willing to work with him, and help him improve. His experience at SCC and his Mormon faith have inspired him.

“More doors have opened for me since I’ve been here,” he said. “I’ve never respected God more than now.”

Usita came here wanting to learn the traits of the Mainland, and return to Hawaii knowing more.

“My whole family is ready to watch me grow,” he says.

In many ways, he’s already learned a great deal. Among oth-

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—MAIKA USITA
STUDENT/B-BALLER



DANIEL BERMAN/EBBTIDE

Maika Usita displays his brilliant sleeve of Polynesian tribal tattoos.

er things, he’s now seen his first snow.

Usita can come across as an intimidating figure when you first lay eyes on the 275-pound locomotive. But as soon as you approach him, you instantly get a sense of his modesty and respect for others as he politely converses with his laid back Hawaiian accent.

“I love learning new things, meeting nice people, and teaching people things that I know,” he said.

Usita got his first tattoo a year and a half ago. It was inspired by his old friend Pabelano, who motivated Usita to live more fully and

play basketball. A Polynesian tribal calling adorns his left arm. He also has the story base of his life on his left forearm, a Polynesian woman on his left leg, three stars on his ankles (representing the three women in his life), the Hawaiian islands on his neck, as well as the words “Have Faith” and the word “Believe.”

“The tattoos represent humbleness and strength, and reflect on my life, how it went from bad to good,” he says.

Though happy here at Shoreline, Usita says he misses Hawaii very much.

“I haven’t surfed in five months,” he said.

In the future, Usita hopes to either play Division I or II basketball, or return home.

“I hope to make a family, and live the rest of my life on Maui, teaching my kids the Hawaiian style of living,” Usita says. “I want to teach my kids diving, hunting, fishing, and to learn sovereignty, to live from the land.”

Usita also hopes to own either a restaurant or a tourist business on Maui. But for now, he says, “Life is great. It couldn’t get any better than this.”