

Free Radicals



Above right, Gaye Chan (left) and Drew Kahu'aina Broderick take “nonprofit” to a new level at the Free Store in Kāne'ohe, one of several free distribution projects by Eating in Public, which Chan co-founded. Above left, what everything costs at the Free Store.

In 2003, artist and University of Hawai'i prof Gaye Chan and her partner, activist-scholar Nandita Sharma, planted some papaya in an open space near their home in Kailua. Despite their intention to share the bounty, a worker chopped the plants down to stumps and fenced off the area. Turns out public land isn't *quite* public. “If we can't use public land to address our collective survival, what do we do?” Chan says. “We all have to eat.”

Thus Eating in Public was born. Inspired by the Diggers, a group of seventeenth-century English dissidents who farmed common lands, EIP creates anarchist distribution projects, like free gardens, stores, seed exchanges and even free money. All are welcome—rich or poor, kin or stranger—to “reclaim the commons and create networks of doers, not consumers.” EIP resists the idea that people must “deserve” to have their needs met.

“With capitalism it's implied that only those who have capital deserve the basic necessities of life,” Chan says. But at EIP's Free Store, for example, “anyone can take. Unlike Santa Claus, EIP gives equally to the naughty and the nice.”

For one EIP project, We(ed)s, participants forage and cook plants considered invasive. Chan teaches people to identify edible plants right under our feet, like ivy gourd, Chan's favorite, which is delicious sauteed with butter and garlic. Or blue porter weed, oxalis, laukahi (broad leaf plantain) and amaranth. EIP organizes a Diggers Dinner, where the only rule of attending is that you bring a dish made “from ingredients you have grown, hunted, fished, foraged, gleaned, bartered, found, gifted or stolen,” Chan says.

To carry the bounty, EIP offers classes in making baskets using plastic baling straps that would otherwise be

thrown into landfills. If you want to recycle something, consider using EIP's Hi-5 Take, Leave, Whatever program. Fed up with the city recycling bins, EIP created their own. Plot twist: It was so successful that the Honolulu City and County Environmental Services Division adopted the program, and it's now in use islandwide.

To keep the cycle rolling, EIP sets up Share Seeds stations to exchange seeds, Free Stores where goods are given and taken and Free Gardens to grow food. If that's not direct enough, there's always Free Money, which is exactly what it sounds like: public boxes with money to be shared or taken as needed.

With so many projects, how does Chan gauge EIP's success? “When I see the uptight person in the neighborhood using my garden hose without asking,” she says, “that's a success.”