

A word that should be eliminated from our language: A message to the media

By Elizabeth Kuulei Bell

While I -- and many others who call Kalaupapa home -- were excited to hear that Father Damien de Veuster will be canonized, it was also deeply offensive to once again see the hurtful terms, "leper priest" and "leper colony" used in some of the local media to describe Damien and my beloved home.

This is not the first time we have seen these archaic and sensational terms used in newspapers and on television in recent years, but with publicity about Damien certain to increase, it's time to forever rid these words from modern journalism. Your newspaper would never allow Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to be described in 2008 as a "Negro leader" or a "colored leader," as he was called in the 1950s and 1960s. Your newspaper would never allow Japanese-Americans to be described by an ethnic slur that was commonly used generations ago.

It is time that people who have been affected by leprosy be shown the same kind of respect.

It has been widely reported that the 2008 Hawaii State Legislature adopted a resolution that acknowledged the great sacrifices made by the people who were sent to Kalaupapa and their families who had to give them up. The resolution also apologized for the pain we suffered because of the harsh separation.

All of us who were forced to leave our families did so because we believed we were a threat to the public health. Thinking more about the community than of ourselves, we gave up freedoms and opportunities so others wouldn't have to do so. We left all that we knew for a strange place and an uncertain future.

Despite these frightening circumstances, most of us who were sent to Kalaupapa went on to rebuild our lives. I married and gave birth to a son and daughter. Although they were taken from me at birth, I never stopped loving them and became close to them when they were older. I was the first woman on the Kalaupapa police force and later was the Postmistress for many years. I have traveled the world and was fortunate enough to present Pope John Paul II with a lei when Father Damien became Blessed Damien during beatification ceremonies in Belgium in 1995. Even though I'm a faithful member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, I, too, consider Damien to be a Saint.

I am many things, but I am not a disease. Neither do I live in a "colony." Since the Kalaupapa peninsula was set aside in 1866 for people with leprosy, it has mostly been referred to in official documents as a "settlement." We like to think of it as a community and home.

Leprosy has been curable for many years (everyone at Kalaupapa has long been cured) and is also known as Hansen's disease, after the doctor who identified the bacillus in 1873. The word "leprosy" remains acceptable to many because it is the name of a disease, but the word "leper" should no longer be used to describe a human being. Cancer is also the name of a disease, but we would never refer to anyone who has or who once had cancer as "a cancooid."

Father Damien did not get placed on this path to sainthood because he contracted a disease. Father Damien will earn this great distinction because of his holy life and love of God, his great works with the people of Kalaupapa, his devotion to helping the children who were sent to Kalaupapa alone, his tireless energy and, now, for being credited by the Catholic Church with miracle cures to those who have prayed to him in their time of need.

Eight years ago, a book was published about Damien that was titled “Leper Priest of Molokai” and filled with offensive language. Dean Alexander, then the superintendent of Kalaupapa National Historical Park, took a stand and refused to let the book be sold at the park’s bookstore. Alexander told the publisher that by repeated use of the offensive word, the book “damages the legacy of Father Damien” and “reinforces the stigma associated with disease and detracts from the real example set by Damien.”

Two years ago, the Park Service, under Superintendent Tom Workman, refused to allow the Kalaupapa bookstore to sell “The Colony: The Harrowing True Story of the Exiles of Molokai” because of the author’s sensational language, numerous inaccuracies and objections by some Kalaupapa residents regarding how they were portrayed.

Anyone who continues to use sensational and outdated terminology also damages Father Damien’s legacy and the legacy of all of us who have risen above a disease and gone on to live proud lives. Let’s make a promise to the people of Kalaupapa that we will no longer use demeaning words from a bygone era. Let’s respect each other as fellow human beings.

Note: Mrs. Elizabeth Kuulei Bell, then President of Ka ‘Ohana O Kalaupapa, wrote this column with the assistance of ‘Ohana Executive Director Valerie Monson in 2009 in response to reporters once again using the words “leper,” “leper colony” and “leper priest” in advance of the canonization of Father Damien de Veuster.