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Merrie Monarch Festival co-founder George Naope dies at 81

*By Wanda Adams
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George Naope, a kumu hula (teacher), a raconteur, a dapper man decked out in bright clothes and huge rings, has died, ending an era for the Merrie Monarch Festival hula competition that he helped found, the Islands' premier hula event. He was 81.

Naope died at his Waiakea Ūka residence in Hilo this morning after a long battle with cancer. Family friend Jacqueline "Skylark" Rosetti said he lost a lung last year and an inoperable tumor was found in his brain this year.

Services are tentatively scheduled for the evening of Nov. 6 and the morning of Nov. 7 at the Afook-Chinen Civic Auditorium, near the Edith Kanakaole Tennis Stadium that has been home to the Merrie Monarch for nearly the last half century.

Naope, whose full name was George Lanakilakekiahiailli Naope, was a co-founder of the festival, a fixture at its many auxiliary events, adored by hula-loving visitors, often seen in a huge peacock-style chair having his picture taken with Japanese nationals who flock to the event in Hilo each year.

In latter years, when he crept up the ramp to the Merrie Monarch stage to perform a hula during the finale, the crowd would go wild.

He was called "The Menehune," for his small stature, or sometimes "Dandy," a reference to King Kalakaua's hula master Dandy Ioane, also a dapper dresser.

Naope is credited with having helped to revive the art of male hula, with helping to revive the custom of 'uniki (a formal graduation ceremony for hula students), with traveling the world to spread hula and Hawaiian culture and with training quite a number of today's prominent kumu hula, among them Hilo's Ray Fonseca of award-winning Halau Hula O Kahikilaulani.

Naope was associated with the Merrie Monarch Festival from its founding in 1963, partnering with co-founder Auntie Dottie Thompson to create arguably the most prestigious hula showcase in the world.

Naope studied hula with two hula giants: 'Iolani Luahine and "Mama" Fuji, the mother of Auntie Edith Kanaka'ole. Despite his public ho'omalimali (charming flattery), he was described as a stern taskmaster when on the hula pa (performance mound or stage or rehearsal space).

He was, said Auntie Dottie some years ago in an interview, "one of a kind."
