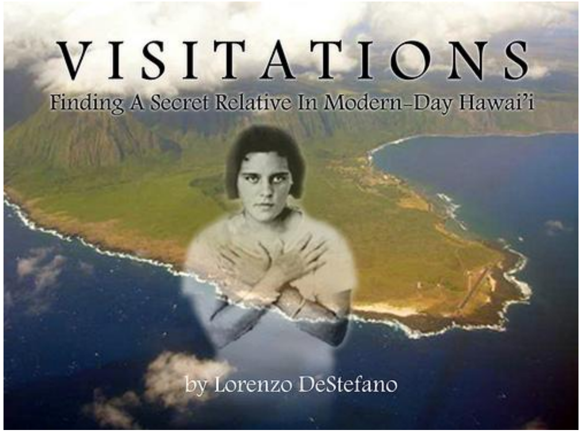


- SYNOPSIS -

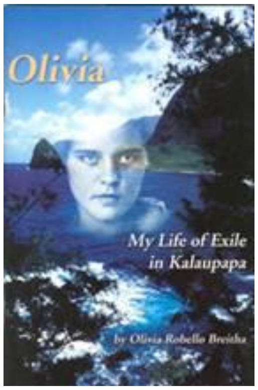
Imagine that you have stumbled upon a family secret, a relative in exile that no one has ever spoken about. Intrigued, you meet that relative, a Portuguese cousin, and spend the next seventeen years, until her death, getting to know the circumstances of her life, her struggles and her quiet achievements.

Such was the case when Honolulu-born writer Lorenzo DeStefano learned from his mother about Olivia Robello Breitha. Diagnosed with leprosy at Kalihi Hospital in 1934, when she was eighteen, Olivia spent the next seventy-two years of her life as a “parolee” (#3306) of the Hawaii State Department of Health. Seventy years of that she spent as a resident of Kalaupapa, the settlement on Moloka’i where Father Damien ministered to Hansen’s Disease patients starting in 1873.

“Visitations”, the memoir DeStefano has written about Olivia and their discovery of each other as relatives and friends, celebrates his cousin as a shining example of triumph over adversity, and is a fascinating story in itself.

Olivia Robello Breitha (1916-2006), grew up in a tight-knit, hardworking Portuguese community on Kaua’i, a community where family pride and the magnetic pull of assimilation often clashed. People kept anything potentially embarrassing locked tightly in the closet. If word got out that someone in the family had contracted such a dreaded disease it would have negative effects on their social standing, the way they were treated at work, at school, even in church.

As someone born and raised in Hawai'i, Lorenzo DeStefano was thirty-seven before he learned he had a cousin with Hansen's disease, known to the world as leprosy. By the time he met Olivia in 1989, the antiquated rules surrounding "the separation sickness" had largely vanished. In the seventeen years that they were able to share, this tough, razor-witted lady taught Lorenzo more about humanity than he could have ever gotten from any university degree in the subject. She was a woman for whom truth was an emotion and candor an essential card in her deck. She doled out both in measured degrees. It was through Olivia's 1988 memoir, "*Olivia-My Life of Exile in Kalaupapa*", that DeStefano and thousands of others began to finally appreciate the reality of people used to being disdained, avoided and scorned as "lepers".



Olivia realized that this word will never completely disappear from use. She also knew that it was extremely important to draw attention to the historical attitudes that have caused hurtful words and attitudes to be accepted in common parlance for far too long. Like so many other labels whose purpose is to exclude people by invoking their color, religion, sexual orientation or, in this case, their medical condition, the word "leper" perpetuates harmful stereotypes and robs people of their rights as individuals. Olivia's slim but highly influential book, still in print after nearly 25 years, chronicles her childhood in Hawai'i', her medical history, and her life as a social activist on behalf of the much-misunderstood disease. She writes with passion of her struggle and, by extension, the struggles of thousands of others against centuries of stigma and fear.

Lorenzo DeStefano explores in "Visitations" the compelling threads of his own family's history. He shares with readers what lay hidden there, waiting to be uncovered. In the process he encountered and came to love a singularly unforgettable person by the name of Olivia.