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HOLLYN JOHNSON/Tribune-Herald

Maya Soetoro-Ng visits one of the computer labs used by the Studio Shaka after-school program at Connections Public Charter School.

By TOM CALLIS

Tribune-Herald staff writer

President Barack Obama isn't the only member of his family to receive a peace prize.

Maya Soetoro-Ng, his half-sister, has been awarded the inaugural Aloha Peace Prize from the Big Island Chapter of the United Nations Association, and will be honored at a ceremony today in Hilo.

The chapter created the award to recognize individuals, not just in Hawaii but around the world, who promote peace and represent the idea of aloha.

Sara Burgess, the chapter's event coordinator, said she came up with the idea after reading a book on Hawaiian culture that referred to aloha as "Hawaii's gift to the world."

"It occurred to me if people did act in the aloha spirit and had that way of being that it would lead to more peace at home and at work and in the world," she said.

To promote aloha, which, along with being used as a greeting, can be an expression of affection or compassion, Burgess said a prize was needed so that living examples of its virtues could be acknowledged and celebrated.

It didn't take long for her to come up with the first recipient.

Burgess recalled meeting Soetoro-Ng, an assistant professor at the University of Hawaii's Department of Education, and being impressed with her positive attitude and work promoting peace education and community building in schools.

She figured she would make a natural choice, and offered her selection to the chapter's board, which it easily accepted.

Ruth Larkin, chapter president, said she was a “logical choice.”

“She has created curriculum for peace in schools and she has worked for peace for most of her life,” Larkin said.

Soetoro-Ng said she was “very flattered” with being selected.

But what does peace education actually entail?

To hear Soetoro-Ng explain it, it’s much more complex than simply denouncing violence.

For her, peace education involves teaching about history and events from multiple perspectives, involving communities in public schools, and encouraging students to be more than a bystander in local and global affairs.

She has promoted those ideas through her Ceeds of Peace program — which encourages traits such as courage, community and compassion — and through international exchanges with the East-West Center.

“A big passion of mine, and what I consider peace education, is the idea that we need to have education that will foster leadership service and sort of global ... and deeply local understandings,” Soetoro-Ng said.

While an advocate of peace, she acknowledges the difficulties of those in leadership positions, including her brother, who has frustrated some of his supporters, including those in the anti-war camp, by advocating for military strikes in Syria.

“I think he’s trying to handle it as best he can,” she said.

“It’s a tremendously challenging situation and it does no good to think of it in simplistic terms,” Soetoro-Ng added.

“I’m certainly glad I’m not there ... but I ultimately, I trust him.

“I trust him to make decisions carefully and I think as a citizen I’m certainly glad he’s there.”

Since becoming president, Obama’s approach to global affairs has been impacted with the information that comes with the job, she said.

“I think that knowledge has complicated matters,” Soetoro-Ng explained. “But I don’t think his global outlook has changed in a fundamental way.”

She said her brother, who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009, is “still true to his core,” and while patriotic, is still mindful of the rest of the world.

“I think he continues to be enormously proud of this country and at the same time he acknowledges there is power, beauty and benevolence to be found in sort of keeping the global picture in mind as well,” Soetoro-Ng said.

She said they still play Scrabble together every day on their iPads, and she tries to provide the familial support that anyone in that job needs.

Politics, though, is not usually a subject they broach.

“He needs to have a sanctuary where family is family,” Soetoro-Ng said. “So we spend a lot of time talking about kids.”

Today’s ceremony will be held at the Nani Mau Gardens.

Along with receiving a trophy, which includes a miniature replica of her standing on a globe, Soetoro-Ng will also receive a day of peace and quiet on the Big Isle, Burgess said.

A member of Gov. Neil Abercrombie’s staff will also provide a proclamation from the governor declaring today as “Maya Soetoro-Ng Day,” and commendations will be presented by state Sen. Russell Ruderman and a representative from Sen. Brian Schatz’s office, she said.

There also will be signers and hula dancers from Kamehameha Schools, Burgess said.

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