61st Annual Kauaʻi CC Commencement Speech

Joanna McCormack Jardine (update 5/12/2026)

Aloha kākou! My name is Joanna McCormack Jardine. Today, I graduate with my Master's from the Myron B Thompson School of Social Work. As a Distance Education student, my journey within UH has been a blessing that allowed me to remain on island.

Though I am originally from Chicago, my grandparents met in Hawaiʻi. Kauaʻi is where I first moved to as an adult and where my four children were born. Kauaʻi is also the place where I struggled and faced the realities of addiction, houselessness, and domestic abuse. And it is the place where I first received help. Through organizations like CFS, PLTI, and H-PEP, I was able to succeed not only academically but also on my path to recovery. It was from this support that I developed my own sense of kuleana to help other people. To me, this is what it means to "Take wisdom and make it deep".

One of the best things about being a DE student is that it made it possible for my children to see me in school. And they didn't watch from a distance, as many of you have seen them running around on campus, as I tried to balance work, school, and life. I want to say thank you to KCC for embracing us, and to Ms. Joanie for watching them when I needed a break. And to my children: thank you for being my "why". I hope you have learned that no barrier, distance, or setback can stop you from reaching your goals.

UH Mānoa gave me the immense honor of learning from all-stars such as Kumu Dolly, Tehani Keanini, and ʻĀnake Lynette Paglinawan. From their heart and soul, they taught me about the deeper meaning of harmony and how to incorporate family, culture, and community into the profession of social work.

Education is holistic. What makes the materials we learn important is the spiritual component, the call for social justice that radiates through these islands and impacts every member of our community. And to the next generation of students willing to answer this call? My hope is that some of you are in this audience. As you walk away with an associate's degree today, please consider continuing your journey within UH to pursue your bachelor's, master's, and even your doctorate. Every bit of wisdom you obtain while working on your degree is like a seed. If you plant and nourish those seeds here, they will one day sustain our beloved Kauaʻi.

To those of you with a heart for the marginalized, the less fortunate, or those caught in the struggles of abuse, there is a path already carved out for you, along with a community of mentors waiting to help you succeed. And you don’t have to leave your home or your family to find it. Through UH DE programs, we can honor indigenous wisdom while integrating professional techniques, and we can do it with humility. Lawe i ka maʻalea a kūʻonoʻono. Take what you have learned in life, and let it profoundly impact your community in a way that is deep, meaningful, and positive. Mahalo