

RYLA 2025; The Oahu Story

By Rick Tabor

RYLA (Rotary Youth Leadership Awards) is an annual Rotary sponsored program that helps high school students develop their leadership skills through team building activities and experiential group work. Each Hawaii County hosts a RYLA Camp. Rotary's around the world have sponsored RYLA for 65 years. This is Oahu's RYLA 2025 story.

A promotional poster for the RYLA 2025 Oahu Camp Erdman. The poster has a dark green border and a light green background. At the top, it says "ROTARY YOUTH LEADERSHIP AWARDS" in white. Below this, on the left, is a green box with "Jan. - Feb." in white, "31-2" in large white numbers, and "2025" in white. To the right of this box are two photos: one of a group of students and one of a group of students in a field. Further right is a logo for "RYLA HAWAII" with a map of Hawaii. Below the "31-2" box is a quote in white: "Today's Lessons are tomorrow's future." To the right of the quote is a Rotary logo and the text "ROTARY SPONSORED EVENT". Below the quote is a photo of a group of students holding a banner that says "OAHU RYLA". To the right of this photo is a box with "CAMP ERDMAN" in large white letters, and below it, "69-385 FARRINGTON HWY, WAIALUA, HI 96791". At the bottom, there is a section with "3-day experience to strengthen your leadership skills! Enjoy food, games, & nature while making new friends. Don't miss out on this amazing opportunity!" followed by "SPACE IS LIMITED SECURE YOUR SPOT TODAY!" and a QR code. At the very bottom, it says "CONTACT RICK AT 808-285-5936 OR EMAIL QUESTIONS TO OAHU@RYLAHAWAII.ORG".

10:00am Friday, January 31, 'Hello, this is Drew, from Camp Erdman. Hey Rick, our power went out around noon during yesterday's storm. The HECO website says it might come up but maybe not, sometime this weekend. Do you guys still want to join us for the weekend?'

I ask, do you have battery lights? Can you sort out how to feed us? Do you think it would be doable? I mean most of our program is outdoors anyway, right?'

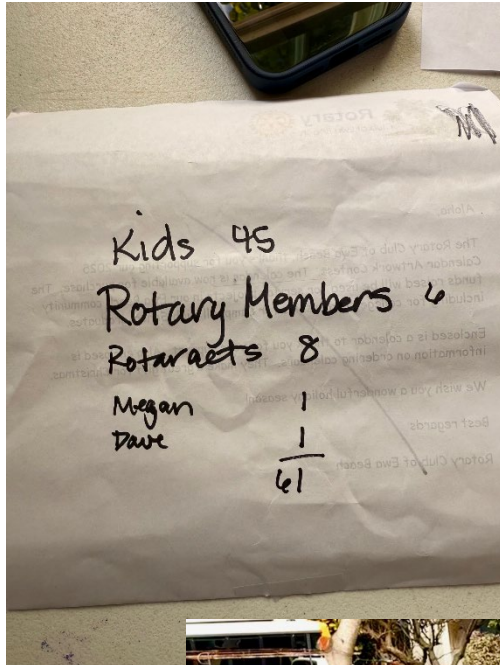
Drew replies, 'We can cater in the food & we have battery powered lights, and the weekend weather forecast is supposed to be fantastic here. And you guys have the entire camp to yourselves. The other party canceled. So, we're good if you guys are up to it.'

I smile and say, 'Let's do it!' Thinking, this is going to be an incredible weekend. After all, the

best test of character is how a person responds to adversity. RYLA's 2025 theme is 'Be flexible, life is what happens while you're busy making other plans.'

Case and point, we already had every scheduled presenter cancel due to various reasons. So the speaker search lights came on and in walked; Captain Kevin McCormick, Alan Silva and Caroline Bengston, Megan Lee and our Maestro, Brian Dunkel agreed to open our program with a rousing rendition of Hawaii Pono'i.

With the packed my car I tossed caution to the wind and let the good times roll. Oh, by the way, that power outage lasted until 4:30pm on Friday. The fans and lights came on, on cue, when Brian said, 'I guess I won't need to set up the electronics this weekend.' Let there be RYLA! Miracles happen! Mahalo to the Power Gods for shining your lights for us.



We had a great turnout and a remarkable camp. Our speakers, previously sight unseen, were dynamic! Our youth were quiet at first. But once reminded of the point reward system, thought provoking questions poured in.

Our RYLA weekend was a step-by-step leadership, team building, life skills series of experiential lessons and activities. Friday evening is dedicated settling into our 5 Ohana Teams of 10 members, program orientation, listening lesson, staff & youth leaders ice breaker, and coming up with the Ohana's team name and team flag, with their Ohana's theme or goal.

Saturday started with us watching the sunrise, breakfast and then Sustainable Coastlines led us in a Ka'ena Point two-hour beach cleaning service project.



Afterwards we gathered in the Assembly Hall for Leadership and Values training sessions from 3 speakers. Broke for lunch and then 30 courageous RYLarians went on the Odyssey Course. The Odyssey is a ropes course that instills leadership and team building while one gets in touch with themselves as they tight-rope their way strapped in their harness and helmet fifty-five feet off the ground, each person taking one step at a time, making their way across the sky.



And in the end, joy and sense of accomplishment fills the heart, mind and soul with feelings of relief and fulfillment, lessons learned, increased self-worth, with pride and so much more.

Time to take a swim, in the pool. Oh, so refreshing.

For the others, there was a low ropes course and archery, and then a quick swim and free time activities with their new friends.

Next up, we gathered in the training room and I shared a lifetime of my Mental Health, Coping Skills, Leadership Self-Care strategic tools.



We started with a progressive relaxation exercise. Each Ohana worked on a situation using one of the following tools: STOP Sign Technique, and 4-Way Test, Conflict Log, Feeling Charades, 9 Coping Skills, Rational Emotive ABC's, and the Negotiation Triangle. After completion of the exercises, each Ohana reported on their experience.

That took us to free time, dinner and the campfire with the Rotary 4-Way Test Ohana Skits and s'mores. Thank you, Nicole, and Rotaract for lighting that fire!

Sunday morning, many of us enjoyed another sunrise, in our new RYLA 2025 royal blue shirts.



Breakfast was followed by the incredible Marathon Relay Games; more teaming, skills building, screams and laughter. This activity is a Rotaract creation that has to be experienced to feel the incredible accomplishments. Anyone who's played will tell you; there's nothing like the Rotaract Marathon Relay Games at RYLA! So much fun!

Next up, we hiked up to the Crystal Cave and took another group shot with our new RYLA 2025 Royal Blue Shirts.





And finally, The Graduation Awards Ceremony. Past District Governor Mark Merrium joined the festivities. Nicole and the Rotaract RYLA Volunteers gave out awards, and we all had a real good time.





The bus arrived early, so by 1:00pm, on Sunday afternoon. And off we went... RYLA 2025 became a memory for a lifetime; Today's Lessons Become Tomorrow's Future. Friends Made, Forever Hugs, Laughter and Joy. Story and picture sharing time.

Meanwhile, the RYLA Team, reviews the RYLarian evaluations, think about this weekend's experience, and start preparing for January 30 - February 1's RYLA 2026. Please, watch our website for student and volunteer registration, around August 1, 2025.

Thank you for your support. It takes an Island to raise good leaders. And here in Hawaii, our Aloha Lifestyle makes for some of the best leaders in the world.



In closing RYLA 2025 was an incredible success because of the following team of volunteers.

Our Rotaract Volunteers included:



Nicole Baltazar

Marisa Matsuo

Evangeline Muyano

Andrew Onofrietti

Sabrina Hallabay

Camille Danao

Evan Miyahara

Gabe Villanueva

Rotary Volunteers included:

Natasha Clarin

Brian Dunkel

Myself (Rick Tabor)

Tracy Hargrave

Cyndy Smith

Kathryn Nicholson

From PBA (Pacific Buddhist Academy)

Megan Lee, Director of Advancement

On Saturday, David Livingston took pictures from breakfast time to the campfire. Thanks Dave.

To each and every one of our RYLarian's, Speakers, Volunteers and YMCA Camp Erdman staff, mahalo nui loa for making RYLA 2025 remarkable! We hope the highlights were mind blowing and we look forward to seeing you at a Rotary project real soon. Take Care.



In August 2025, you'll be able to register for Oahu's RYLA 2026 at <https://www.rylahawaii.org/oahu>