



**Dr. Milton M. Leslie,
DrPH
Class of 1994**

Where do you live now? What do you love about it?

Aloha, my name is Dr. Milton Leslie, a proud 1994 graduate of Konawaena High School. I was born and raised in Kealahou and Napo‘opo‘o, deeply rooted in my Native Hawaiian heritage and the values passed down by my kūpuna and parents. After graduation, I left Kona to expand my academic and professional journey—spending over two decades gaining experience in education, healthcare, and public health research.

In 2015, I made the intentional decision to return home to Kona so I could be near my parents and raise my three keiki—Noa, Lea, and Mia—alongside my wife, Melody. Coming home grounded me. It reminded me of the power of community, the strength of our culture, and the value of simple moments—like having coffee with my dad, talking story with my mom, watching the sunrise over Mauna Loa, or feeling the misty mauka rains in the afternoon.

As a public health and cultural leader, I’ve come to understand that the spirit of aloha isn’t just a feeling—it’s a way of being, unique to this place and its people. Living in Kona allows me to serve the community that raised me, honor the traditions I was taught, and ensure that my children grow up connected to their roots. There’s no place I’d rather be.

Describe your career path since graduating from Konawaena High.

After graduating from Konawaena High School in 1994, I began my academic journey with a dual focus in business and education, eventually serving as a Title I educator on O‘ahu’s Wai‘anae Coast. While I found purpose in supporting students and families, I was increasingly drawn to the broader systemic issues impacting the health and well-being of our communities—particularly the disparities I had witnessed growing up in West Hawai‘i.

That deeper calling led me to transition into healthcare and public health. I earned a Master’s in Healthcare Administration and Leadership at American Intercontinental University, and later a Doctorate in Public Health from Capella University, where I focused my research on cultural competency and systems-level strategies to improve health outcomes for underserved populations. My doctoral work explored how culturally responsive care could reduce disparities and build stronger trust between healthcare teams and the communities they serve.

Since then, I’ve continued to contribute to the public health field through applied research, peer-reviewed publications, and community-based initiatives that center the lived experiences of Native Hawaiians and other rural populations. I currently serve as the Senior Director of Experience and Optimization at Hawai‘i Island Community Health Center, where I lead efforts that bridge cultural understanding with health systems innovation and patient-centric care. I also serve as a public health lecturer and preceptor, mentoring the next generation of public health professionals. My work remains grounded in the values of aloha, equity, and kuleana—guided always by the community that raised me.

What was your most memorable experience at KHS?

While there are too many memories to count, the experiences that stand out most are the connections I had with the teachers who helped shape who I am today. Educators like Mr. Donald Isbell, 1st Sgt. Joe Calica, and Band Director (and former Principal) Shawn Suzuki played instrumental roles in my growth.

They instilled in me the belief that the only true limits are the ones we place on ourselves.

I'm forever grateful to the Konawaena teachers who led with heart, gave generously of their time, and believed in their students—often before we believed in ourselves. Their impact stays with me to this day, and I carry their lessons into every space I now serve.

What advice would you give to Konawaena High School students?

Your journey doesn't end at graduation—it's only the beginning. Learning will continue in ways you never expect: through challenges, through mistakes, and sometimes through moments that feel like failure. But those moments don't define you. What defines you is how you respond—with humility, perseverance, and the belief that your purpose is greater than any setback.

As someone who left Kona to grow, struggled through the unknown, and came home to serve the community that raised me, I can tell you this: your roots are your strength. Never forget where you come from, who helped you get here, and the dreams that carry you forward. The path won't always be easy—but it will always be worth it if you lead with aloha, honor your kuleana, and stay committed to becoming the best version of yourself.

Some of the world's greatest achievements were born out of failure. Let those stories remind you that your potential is limitless. Keep going. We're all cheering you on.

Have you been back to campus since graduation? If yes, for what occasion?

Yes—many times, and always with pride. Giving back to Konawaena has been one of the most meaningful ways I've stayed connected to both my roots and my children's future. I currently serve on the Konawaena High School Community Council, where I have the privilege of working alongside dedicated educators and leaders like Principal Akeo. Together, we strive to uplift our haumāna and strengthen the foundation of learning for every Wildcat.

Because our Konawaena keiki are the next generation of Wildcats, I also serve as the PTA President at Konawaena Elementary. Supporting both campuses allows me to give back to the community that raised me, while ensuring my children—and all our children—have opportunities to grow, thrive, and feel proud of where they come from. It's an honor to serve, and a reminder that our greatest impact often begins right here at home.