

Honolulu

Nonprofits Protest Coca-Cola's Sponsorship Of The Great Aloha Run

The soda brand's involvement sends an unhealthy message, say the groups who helped operate an affiliated event for kids. Now they'll have their own fun run.



By Suevon Lee    / February 11, 2019

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The [Great Aloha Run](#) is a popular Honolulu tradition, drawing tens of thousands of participants each year.

The 8.15-mile race held on Presidents Day has raked in more than \$14 million since it started three decades ago, with proceeds going to more than 150 nonprofits including the Boys and Girls Club of Hawaii, Big Brothers Big Sisters Hawaii and others.

Its affiliated youth run, the mile-long [Keiki Great Aloha Run](#), has been a major fundraiser for area schools since it became part of the brand in 2015. Last year it drew a few thousand runners ages 5-12 and raised more than \$33,000 for participating schools to spend on gym equipment, gardens and water fountains.

But a corporate sponsorship deal struck last year between The Great Aloha Run and Coca-Cola has severed a partnership at the heart of the youth run, whose mission has been promoting healthy habits and nutrition among Hawaii's kids.

“Them taking money from Coca-Cola is making a statement and that alone was enough to encourage us to look at other options,” said Colby Takeda, president of [Kahoomiki](#), a nonprofit that served as the key organizer of the Keiki Great Aloha Run, handling registration, planning and coordination among community groups.

Nevertheless, the Keiki Great Aloha Run was held as planned Saturday at Ala Moana Beach Park.

The Keiki Great Aloha Run went on Saturday at Ala Moana Park without its usual community partners.

Coca-Cola became a [Great Aloha Run sponsor](#) last year, with its Powerade product designated as the event's "official sports drink." Coca-Cola-owned Dasani bottled water is also now a mainstay of the race.

As head of a coalition of community groups concerned over a growing childhood obesity and diabetes rate and decreased levels of physical exercise among children, Kahoomiki said Great Aloha's ties to the purveyor of sugar drinks sends the wrong message to kids.

It's organizing a separate youth race, the Keiki Rainbow Run, to be held March 16 at the University of Hawaii Manoa's Clarence T.C. Ching Field.

Kahoomiki was also under the impression Coca-Cola's sponsorship allowed it to hand out Powerade and single-use bottled water not just at the main run, but at the youth run, which is typically held a few days before the marquee event.

That was not the case, said Great Aloha Run race director Brent Imonen.

"You won't see any of those products at the Keiki Run," he said.

He declined to comment on Great Aloha Run's length of contract or terms with Coca-Cola. Other [major sponsors](#) include Hawaii Pacific Health, The Queen's Health Systems and Alaska Airlines.

Product placement and sponsorship by sugary drink brands is commonplace within the sports world, with PepsiCo or Coca-Cola ads visible at many athletic events.

But when there's an affiliated youth component promoting healthy drinks and eco-friendly water refill stations and compostable cups, could a soda brand's corporate marketing presence seep into a kid's sponge-like sensibility?

"With kids, I cannot tell them white, and you tell them black. We're contradicting each other," said Paula Adams, executive director of [Hawaii Afterschool Alliance](#), which followed Kahoomiki's lead in pulling out of the Great Aloha Run this year.

"It's very important to us to say, we are just promoting water."

'Control The Message'

Kahoomiki, known also as the Hawaii Council of Physical Activity and Nutrition, decided late last year to withdraw from the Great Aloha Run and organize its own kids' event.

It had operated the event since 2011 and felt that bringing it under the Great Aloha Run umbrella in 2015 was beneficial, especially considering the annual health expo that's a feature of the event.

“We love working with them and they are a great organization,” Takeda said. “We decided to pull out to control the message we are presenting to families, particularly around healthy lifestyles, fresh fruits and vegetables, hydrating water over sugary beverages.

“Us creating a new event with our partners would help us do that.”

[The Keiki Rainbow Run](#) has secured sponsorships from Kaiser Permanente and Island Insurance Foundation and gotten 60 schools to participate so far. The full amount of the \$15 early bird entry fee will be donated to schools, according to its website.

The nonprofit is also capitalizing on its new direction to champion several bills in the Hawaii Legislature this session. One would [require restaurants](#) to remove soda or fruit juice as the default beverage for kids' meals in favor of water or milk. Another is additional funding for [school gardens](#), one way for schools to promote healthy eating.

School gardens, like this one at Ala Wai Elementary School in 2017, is a chance for students to grow crops like uala, or sweet potato, and also learn about environmental sustainability and healthy eating habits.

The Hawaii Department of Education's [wellness guidelines](#) discourage any beverages containing caffeine, artificial colors or artificial flavors to be provided or sold on school campuses, whether in a vending machine, fundraiser or school store.

Only 58 percent of DOE schools abided by that recommendation in the 2017-18 school year, according to a recent DOE [safety and wellness survey](#).

“The whole idea was to try and align what we do with the wellness guidance because we want the kids to have a consistent message about healthy habits, especially regarding food and drinks,” Adams said.

The Rainbow Run will feature snacks like yogurt, milk and granola bars. Snacks at the Keiki Great Aloha Run, said Imonen, included fruit and water.

[Kokua Hawaii Foundation](#) is another community organization that decamped with Kahoomiki to support the new Rainbow Run. The environmental education nonprofit wants to minimize single-use water bottles to reduce waste through refillable water stations and reusable cups.

“There’s no need for us to purchase drinking water that’s packaged and shipped, not just due to health impacts but the environmental footprint that creates,” said executive director Natalie McKinney. “We worked really hard with the Keiki (Great Aloha) run to offer those options and minimize the packaging.”

Great Aloha Run officials said they don’t begrudge community groups for their decision to establish a separate youth race, pointing out it expands the number of fun run offerings for kids in the community.

“In the long run, the keiki win,” said Imonen.

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