Olivia Robello Breitha, whose autobiography ‘My Life of Exile in Kalaupapa’ written in 1988, is a compelling and inspirational account of life as a Hansen’s disease patient on Molokai’s isolated peninsula, died on 28 September 2006 of congestive heart failure at a care facility in Kalaupapa. She was 90. Her death reduced the Kalaupapa registry number to 33 patients. Mike McCarten, State Health Department Administrator of the settlement, said a noon Catholic Mass was held for Olivia and she was buried next to her husband. Services and burials at Kalaupapa are done quickly because it lacks facilities to preserve bodies.

If life had gone the way Olivia Robello had planned it, she probably would have married her fiancé in 1934, had children and lived an ordinary and uneventful life in Hawaii. Instead she was diagnosed with leprosy and sent into exile. At 18 Olivia was taken from her parents’ home and, like thousands of others before her, forced to live at Kalaupapa. This was at a time when the disease dictated where she could live, who she could touch and if she would become a mother.

Olivia was born 6 June 1916, on the island of Kauai to an immigrant Portuguese family. Life was ordinary and uneventful, she wrote in her memoirs, until stomach pains resulted in a visit to the hospital in October 1934. While being checked for appendicitis, a hospital worker asked if he could take a tissue sample of her skin. Olivia agreed, not knowing she would be tested for leprosy.

Days later, after returning home, a man showed up at the house asking for her, and Olivia let him in. As the two sat in the living room, the man, whom she would later refer to as ‘the bounty hunter,’ informed the teenager that she had to go to Kalihi Hospital on Oahu.

‘I asked, “Why should I go there?” He said, “Because you have leprosy.”’

In an instant she changed from ‘Olivia Robello, who was happily waiting to be married,’ to a frightened girl, estranged from friends and family, none of whom had the illness.

Back then, a diagnosis of leprosy not only meant that sickness and death were likely, but also that life itself would be an isolated affair. People with Hansen’s disease were so ostracized; Olivia could not face her fiancé, Les, and never saw him again.

At Kalihi Hospital, she became patient Number 3306. When she was photographed, a nurse wanted her to hold a board bearing not her name, but the number. A defiant Olivia refused. The photographer asked her to smile; she would not. ‘After you take my picture, you can get out of this place,’ she recalled thinking. ‘I can’t go home.’

Still young and not exhibiting obvious signs of the illness, she sometimes ran away from the hospital to see loved ones or a movie. Shortly after one escape, she received a letter saying she was being sent to Kalaupapa.

Olivia lived at Kalihi until June 1937 and worked in the sewing room, patching bed linen and making pyjamas for $9 a month. Her treatment consisted of so-called contrast baths, sprays of first hot and then cold water.

In May 2003, Olivia wrote of Kalaupapa: ‘What once was a prison is a paradise to me now. Despite the threat of an uncertain future, of budget cuts and a dwindling patient population, this is the place
where, God willing, I hope to remain. I have lived on this remote peninsula since the SS Hawaii delivered me here on June 30, 1937. I was a number then, Number 3306.’

The settlement, separated from the rest of the island by sea cliffs that rise 2,000 feet above the peninsula and ocean, was a case study in isolation. To reach it required travel by plane or boat to the island and a journey down a steep trail by mule or on foot. It could not be accessed by car.

Between 1866 and 1969, more than 8,000 people were sent to Kalaupapa. Once there, Olivia saw people she had met at Kalihi Hospital, but now she barely recognized them because the disease had so disfigured them. She also found friends there, people who cared for one another ‘and all prayed for the same thing — a cure for this horrible calamity that had befallen each of us.’

At Kalaupapa, she married fellow patient Johnny Breitha. ‘I’m sad for her death,’ Hawaiian film maker Stephanie Castillo said, ‘but I’m comforted to know that Olivia is with her husband, the love of her life. She liked saying, “Johnny’s waiting for me. I’m coming, Johnny.”’ For the rest of her life, she not only battled the physical effects of the illness, but waged an ongoing battle to reshape the public’s perception of those with a malady that dates to ancient times.

Olivia was inspired to write her book when she heard the word ‘leper’ used in an episode of the television series ‘M*A*S*H.’ She once wrote: ‘They catch you like a crook and you don’t have any rights at all; they didn’t care about ruining a life. They didn’t even give me a few days to take care of my personal life. So be it. I was just a number. My name is Olivia. It’s not L-E-P-E-R. . . . I wrote a book because I wanted people to know what I feel, what I felt, how much I struggled, fighting the disease, fighting ignorance, fighting bureaucrats, fighting that hurtful word. . . . Trying not to be a statistic — trying to be a person.’

‘Olivia was a no-holds-barred woman who, if she had an opinion, would share it with you regardless of how you would take it,’ said Loretta Zahner, a Kalaupapa Health Services Care Home nurse, of her next-door neighbour. ‘She was feisty, passionate, quick-witted and intelligent. For those who don’t know what Kalaupapa is and was, her story of what happened in life to a “normal girl”. . . because she was diagnosed and how it totally changed (her life), it’s a real boost of knowledge.’

Olivia Breitha was among the Kalaupapa residents featured in Stephanie Castillo’s 1993 Emmy Award-winning documentary “Simple Courage” on the handling of leprosy patients here during the 19th and early 20th centuries.

‘The tragedy for her was because of this, she was taken out of society, she chose not to have children of her own — and she loved children — and she was never able to return (to life outside of Kalaupapa),’ Castillo said.

Olivia was a writer and activist who advocated for the rights of people with leprosy. ‘She wrote her autobiography to try and sensitise people to terminology, so they wouldn’t refer to people by labels that took away their identity and humanity,’ said Anwei Law, International Coordinator of IDEA (Integration, Dignity and Economic Advancement), an advocacy and support organization for people with Hansen’s disease. ‘She was very opposed to the word “leper.” . . . She wanted people to know her as Olivia, for people to see her for who she was and not the disease she had.

Cristóbal S. Berry-Cabán, PhD
Womack Army Medical Center, Fort Bragg