

Oral History of Ann Kobayashi

This is December 11, 2019 and it is 10:40 AM. We are in the office of Councilwoman Ann Kobayashi in City Hall known as Honolulu Hale in downtown Honolulu. We are here to record Councilwoman Kobayashi's oral history for Malama Manoa. My name is Harry Spiegelberg and I will be conducting the interview.

HS We will get started. When did your family first arrive in Hawaii, where did they come from and where did they first live in the islands?

AK I am the third generation of my family in Hawaii. The first generation was my grandfather who came from Tokyo. My grandmother came when she was six months old and she came from the southern part of Japan where Hiroshima is located. When they arrived they moved to Maui. My father was born on Maui and then they moved to the area of Kakaako in Honolulu. Growing up I lived in the Punchbowl area for awhile and then moved to Old Pali Road. When I got married, my husband was from Manoa, so we bought the house in the valley, and I raised my children there. They grew up knowing the things about the valley that you knew growing up.

HS What did your grandfather do for work?

AK He was an engineer for Amfac when he first moved here from Japan. He wasn't on the plantation so that is why they lived in Kakaako. He attended all of the auctions in the city and purchased many nice art pieces and I have and treasure many of those pieces today including some very nice tables. My father was a dentist. He went to McKinley High School and then USC. When he returned to Honolulu he became the dentist at McKinley. He also had his own private practice located in Chinatown. I sort of grew up in Chinatown because I would go to his office after school. I would get to know what to eat and what to buy. Those were the good old days.

HS Can you tell me about your siblings?

AK I have only one brother who owns Like Like Drive Inn on Keeaumoku Street. He married into the family that owns that well-liked restaurant and now he manages it.

HS Where did you go to school?

AK I went to Lincoln School that is now known as the Linekona Art Museum across the street from the Honolulu Museum of Art on Beretania Street. That used to be Lincoln Elementary School where I attended. So I grew up in that area and then I went to Stevenson Middle School and at the time it was on the slope of Punchbowl, and then I went to Roosevelt High School. After high school I attended Pembroke for a few years and then attended Northwestern University.

HS You and I are high school rivals as I am a Buff n Blue from Punahou. I first

attended Manoa Elementary School and then went to Stevenson Middle School for one year getting my lunch money taken away by the Papakolea blasas. I then transferred to Punahou repeating the seventh grade.

HS What do you remember about the first car your family owned?

AK The first car was like an old coupe and then we had a station wagon with wood siding. At the same time my mother had a smaller car.

HS Can you paint a picture of your early childhood?

AK We spent a lot of time on the beach. When my father was growing up he was one of ten children and for a time he spent his childhood in Waimanalo with a Hawaiian family. He learned to cook a pig in an imu. We always had a beach house so we spent a lot of time at the beach in Hauula. We had a very happy childhood because we had nice Christmas trees. As I said earlier I grew up on the slopes of Punchbowl and at the start of the war we watched the Japanese bomb Pearl Harbor. As a result I remember going to school carrying a gas mask. I remember my mother saying that when people ask you, you tell them that you are Japanese American, do not say that you are simply Japanese. I remember the family, like everyone, was rationed for food and gasoline. Yes, I would say that I had a very normal childhood with lots of activities. We would at times go traveling, including trips to the neighbor islands. We would go on a small boat and I would get sick on it all the time because they didn't have planes going back and forth.

HS When you were growing up what holiday or special food dishes do you remember being your favorites?

AK Because my father's office was in Chinatown we ate lots of Chinese food and also lots of Hawaiian food. We rarely ate Japanese food. We always had a big bowl of poi on the table and my grandmother always made her own lau lau. On Christmas and New Year we would gather with friends and family and go to a Chinese restaurant and have a nine- course dinner on a round table.

HS You talked about having one sibling, a brother. What can you tell us about his life today?

AK Growing up he had a bicycle, but I was not allowed to have one. He grew up playing basketball. We grew up together playing marbles with the holes in the ground and other games. In those days we didn't have transformers or other digital games that the kids enjoy today. We played with the neighbor kids and one of the fathers used to bring movies for us to watch once a week in their living room. We didn't have any fancy toys and of course we didn't have computers.

HS When did your family get a television set?

AK I think I was in the ninth grade. It was a large screen and there was only one station

to watch in the beginning. Before that we would sit around and listen to the radio. One program was "The Shadow". It was good because we were all home together listening to the radio.

HS When did you first live in Manoa?

AK I didn't live in Manoa until I was in my twenties when I was first married. The house was on Waaloa Street and I lived there for over fifty years. The home was near Paradise Park. That is how I got politically involved because that was conservation land I was opposed to having it be developed into a tourist attraction.

HS What are your earliest memories of living in the valley?

AK Where I lived it rained a great deal, but it was very green. We lived next to Manoa Stream so my children were able to go into the stream because the water was clean and they would catch oopu and other kinds of fish. Then Paradise Park moved in and the water changed and it wasn't safe to swim there any longer. They used to clean their cages that held the birds in the stream. On the other side of the stream from where we lived there were Gardenia, Ginger and Wood Rose flower farms. Then at some point the farmers couldn't keep up those operations so they had to leave.

Recently I moved to Puuhonua Street which is a block above Ferdinand Street. You turn Ewa by the Seventh Day Adventist Church when you are on Manoa Road.

HS Tell us of any special or unique experiences you had in Manoa?

AK Well I think it was going against nature and not protecting the environment. This is when I was going against Paradise Park. It was also the time that I met Mary Cooke and Helen Nakano. They got me involved in the effort to go against Hawaiian Electric Company who was trying to get the power lines installed on high towers on Waahila Ridge. Thank God that effort was a success and today we still enjoy the nice view. All my time living in Manoa my efforts have been to protect the beauty of the environment and keeping the stream clean.

HS You mentioned that you have children. I know you have a son. Didn't he get elected to the Legislature?

AK He just got elected in 2018. I encouraged him to get a real job, but he was insistent on doing something to protect the environment. He was one of those who started the "Protect Manoa" and he is one who is very devoted to protecting the valley.

I have another son who lives in Okinawa and my daughter lives in San Francisco. Because they live far away we only get together once in awhile.

HS What things do you miss that you used to experience, but no longer exist in the valley?

AK I miss the clean water in Manoa Stream where children used to be able to safely play, but this is no longer possible. We used to have a little boat and they used to sit in it and catch fish and use a net to get whatever else was available. I miss that and that the water is no longer clean. My neighborhood used to be very safe and I didn't worry when I sent my kids out to play. This is no longer the way things are. I just had my house broken into and had to install a security system. Over on Manoa Hillside Estates they have had a lot of crime to be concerned with even though it is a gated community. They have had a lot of robberies in those nice homes, but Manoa is still a good place. The people who live here are all nice to each other and respect each other when you are driving, and nobody tries to push you off the road. They are patient and as we get older we are a little slower. Yes, it is very nice living in Manoa. Even when I go downtown I don't feel these courtesies.

HS What do you like most about Manoa Valley?

AK I would say that the people are the most important part, and the green that is everywhere. I recently went to a ceremony at the Chinese Cemetery and they gave a history of the complex. The gentleman said that the Chinese people walked all over the island looking for a place that would be suitable for their cemetery with the best feng shui or healing properties and they found it in Manoa Valley. At that place there is a presence of healing properties and it is so peaceful.

HS Lastly, what would you personally like to see preserved or improved in the valley?

AK I would like to see all of the green conservation areas preserved. It should be a requirement in the valley that it is difficult for people to cut down trees on their property unless there is a very good reason. Keeping the green in the valley should be tantamount.

HS Can you tell me when you were growing up what hobbies and activities kept you busy and what your passtimes are today?

AK Growing up I used to collect things and I had various collections that I treasured. I also used to cook a great deal because my family did a lot of cooking. When I got into politics all of that went by the wayside as I was always in Neighborhood Board meetings and other district meetings.

HS This may be an obvious question, but what do you consider as your greatest accomplishment?

AK I think that just working with people and helping wherever I can, especially with children and with seniors. That is why I went into politics because those two groups didn't have lobbyists or others to represent them They could not afford campaign contributions so I went into it with the aim of helping children and seniors and that is what I have been doing and when I retire I intend to help various senior citizen groups.

HS Can you give me a chronology of your political career? When did you initially get into

politics?

AK I think when I first ran for president in school is when I first began my interest in politics. When I went to Pembroke I was president of my freshman class. When I returned home to Honolulu I got involved with protecting Manoa Valley against the intrusion from Paradise Park and looking after preservation land. Growing up my father was very active with the Boy Scouts and my mother was active with the Red Cross, so we as a family were always busy volunteering for various causes and organizations.

HS You grew up with that sense of helping and giving back!

AK Yes, this was instilled into us at a young age.

HS In the City Council you are allowed to run for two back to back four year terms.

AK Yes, that is correct. I performed my first eight-year term on the Council representing Manoa Valley and Palolo Valley and then I ran for Mayor against Mufi Hanneman. I lost that race. Duke Bainum took my place on the Council. Then he unfortunately passed away a short six or seven months into his term. At the time I was vacationing in Italy and I got a number of calls to quickly come home. So I ran for his seat and won, fulfilling the rest of his first four-year term. I then ran again for the full term of eight more years. That is why I have been there so long.

HS So have you been on the Council for over 16 years?

AK Yes, because when I first ran for office it was to fill Andy Mirikitani's seat because unfortunately he was sent to prison, so I served out his term. Before that I was in the legislature serving in the Senate for a period of 14 years.

HS Wow! You will have served a total of 30 years at the end of the year 2020.

AK Yes, I have. When I left the Legislature I helped Jeremy Harris run for Mayor and also helped Ben Cayatano run for Governor. Then I had the opportunity to get back into politics and got onto the Council. The Council was interesting because you are working day to day with people in your neighborhood on everyday problems.

HS That must be very satisfying!

AK Yes, it is! I will be retiring at the end of 2020 and I will never give up protecting Manoa Valley because it is such a wonderful place to live. It is so beautiful and the people here are great. We have to keep Manoa Valley the way it is.

HS Absolutely! So you will be retiring in a year. Can you think of who might take your place on the Council?

AK Yes, I think that Calvin Say might run. He is currently in the House of Representatives. He lives in Palolo Valley that is part of my Council District. He has told me that he will be announcing to run soon for my Council seat. I don't know of anyone else. In addition Dave Watase, a community activist is also running to replace me. He has been working on the Ala Wai project with folks from Manoa.

HS As they tell me as a retired Naval Officer, "thank you for your service" representing

Manoa Valley all these many years. I want to thank you so much for making yourself available in documenting your interesting oral history for Malama Manoa.