

Brian Taniguchi Oral History

This is July 23, 2020 and it is 10:15 am. We are in the office of Senator Brian Taniguchi (BT) in the Hawaii Capitol building in downtown Honolulu. We are here to record Senator Taniguchi's oral history for Malama Manoa. My name is Harry Spiegelberg (HS) and I will be conducting the interview.

(HS) To begin, please tell us when your family arrived in Hawaii, where they came from and where did they first live in the islands.

(BT) My great grandparents came to Hawaii (I have four sets of great grandparents) – Taniguchi, Tanimoto, Ichiki and Amano. The Taniguchi side of the family came sometime in the early 1900s. On my father's mother's side, Tanimoto, my great grandfather Hatsuzo, came around 1886 on either the fifth or sixth ship that came from Japan when they had the contract labor situation. On my mom's side my grandfather Masaji Ichiki came around 1913 and then we're not sure about my grandmother because we have conflicting information about her so we haven't nailed that down. My Ichiki great grandfather, Yasaburo, came to Hawaii in 1899 to work on the sugar plantation on Maui.

On my dad's side, my grandfather Minoru Taniguchi moved to Honolulu and then the Big Island where he met my grandmother. We think she was born in the Kingdom of Hawaii in 1892 in Honolulu. And so, they married. My grandmother had a large family, but Minoru, we think, only had a step brother. My grandmother had seven siblings, because the Tanimoto side of the family was large. The Tanimoto side of the family began building theaters on the Big Island. There was a theater in Honokaa, in Kona, they had one in Honomu, and then my Taniguchi grandfather opened a theater in Olaa in about 1926. This theater was torn down in about 1973.

My grandfather Masaji Ichiki, on my mom's side of the family, opened six or seven supermarket type stores. Along the Lahaina strip there is still the original Ichiki store building, so there is the original store in Lahaina which is the M. Ichiki Building, but it is no longer owned by my family.

(HS) So given that background, where were you born?

(BT) I was born at Queen's Hospital and was raised in Manoa. My dad's family, in the late 1930s, had six siblings, and four were going to college at that time. And so, my grandfather purchased a small house on Pamoia Road which is near UH and Noelani School. It is the road that leads down to Saint Francis School. So, we grew up on Pamoia Road as my Dad got the house. At that time, it was baby boom city and we probably had close to 30 kids in the neighborhood and it was a wonderful place to grow up. There were probably a two dozen kids that were my age. There were also many a year or so younger than me and we all hung around together.

(HS) What is the earliest memory you have of growing up in Manoa?

(BT) On Pamoia Road, we lived in a back lot down a long driveway. In the back we were right up against the University of Hawaii property. I have a recollection of the backyard being all open. In the early years there used to be cows raised on this property belonging to the University Dairy. The most traumatic thing was when the University built a fence and that blocked us out. But during the summer we used to go down to the Ag Extension where they had cows. Close to Saint Francis Convent entrance there was a path. There were cows and corn growing. We would pull the California grass and feed the cows. There

were about 40 or 50 kids of all different ages, running around and feeding the cows. These are some of my earliest remembrances.

(HS) I know exactly where you are talking about. My dad had privileges at the University of Hawaii and we got milk delivered at our house with an inch of cream on the top. We also got eggs delivered from that same University agricultural facility.

(HS) Please tell me about your education.

(BT) I went to Manoa Elementary School and then to Robert Louis Stevenson Middle School and then I graduated from Roosevelt High School. At the time Manoa was K through six and I remember having wonderful teachers. I was always the dumbest guy in the smartest class. A lot of my classmates went to Punahou. Many of my close friends went to Stevenson so that is where I ended up. It was kind of a divided thing in that my dad was a high school counselor at Kaimuki High School. My mom was a Puanhou grad and so they left it up to me. Both of my parents were public-school advocates.

(HS) When you were at Manoa School were you a JPO?

(BT) No I wasn't, but I did go to Japanese School in Manoa after the school day was over. This is still on East Manoa Road. I went there until I was in ninth grade and I was a JPO there. So I got to go to the JPO Picnic. I would walk to the Japanese School from my home on Pamoia Road.

(HS) So what happened after you graduated from Roosevelt?

(BT) After Roosevelt I applied to and was accepted into a small liberal arts College in downstate Illinois that is called Monmouth College. It was a part of a group of small liberal arts colleges. There was Ripon, Monmouth, Grinnell, and Beloit. With one application you could apply to all of the member schools. I wanted to get into Beloit, but they did not accept me. I was accepted to two of the member schools and in the end, I chose Monmouth because they had a Japanese language program and since I had studied Japanese after school earlier this made sense for me. Also Monmouth had an exchange program with Princeton. I ended up at Monmouth in southern Illinois in the middle of the corn fields. I spent one year there and then I came back to Honolulu and eventually graduated from the University of Hawaii Manoa.

(HS) What did you get your degree in?

(BT) At the time it was called Liberal Studies and it was what they called a constellation of courses and my title was Peoples of Hawaii. You made your own major.

(HS) What hobbies have you enjoyed, let's say now when you're not up to your eye balls in doing your job?

(BT) Well. I am sort of a collector and I collect Hawaiian stamps, pre 1900 Hawaiian stamps. That is one of my passions. Years ago, I dabbled in collecting baseball cards that fascinated me.

(HS) After you got your Bachelor degree, what was your first job?

(BT) In my junior year I got an internship in the College of Continuing Education to work in government. As a result, I was working in the Governor's Office which was Governor John Burns at the time. I spent a semester working in the governor's office. I worked under two people. One was Dave Paco who was in charge of Boards and Commissions (appointments) and I also worked under Dan Aoki who was one of

the Governors right-hand men. That was in 1972. I really enjoyed my time doing that. The Governor would come in the back where our office area was and talk story with us. It was good to talk story with him.

(HS) How long were you in that position?

(BT) I was in that intern position for one semester and then he hired me on the staff for another year. Then I went to work for the Housing Authority where I worked on a study regarding Eviction Communities. At that time there was Kalama Valley, an area near Vineyard Street, an area in Waimanalo and an area called Ota Camp that housed primarily Filipino families. I also spent the better part of two years developing a teen center in Waipahu. As I recall there was a type of split between the immigrant families from the Philippines and the local Filipino families. There was fighting and bad feeling between the two groups. The YWCA at the time was developing a group for teen unwed mothers. They also were developing a center for the teenagers from the two groups to mix more and to do things together. I spent three years living in Waipahu and working on that teen center project. Again, this was a time when I was still at the University of Hawaii Manoa working on my Bachelor's degree.

(HS) How did you get into the business of being a politician?

(BT) Well, that is a good question. When I was in middle school at Stevenson, I wanted to do public service, not exactly student government. They had various committees, one of which was directed toward this called the Lunalilo Club. We were actually the JPOs for Stevenson. Most mornings I was out in front of the school assisting with the traffic. At that time Stevenson was 7th, 8th and 9th grades and in the 9th grade I ran for class secretary and I won, so that is sort of how it all began. I ran for office again in high school at Roosevelt when I became student body vice-president in my senior year. There was quite a bit of activism at Roosevelt at the time. The year before a guy by the name of Tom Gill was the student body president trying to make "radical" changes including in the dress code and off campus lunch for seniors. That is how I got started in an elected type-position at Roosevelt.

(HS) When did your first run for the House of Representatives here?

(BT) That was in 1980, but first I was on the Manoa Neighborhood Board between 1978 and 1981. I ran for and won a position in the House when Representative Charles Ushijima retired. At the time we had a three-member district with Gerald DeHeer, Carol Fukunaga and Charles Ushijima. At that time, I took Charlie's spot. Then between the years 1980 through 1994. I was the Chairman of the Transportation Committee between 1982 and 1986. I also Chaired the Higher Education and the Arts Committees between 1986 and 1990. Next, I was the House majority Leader between 1990 and 1992. All told I was in the House for 14 years so I ran for the House spot seven times.

Then in 1994 I transitioned to the Senate where I have been serving until now. In that year, Ann Kobayashi ran for Mayor of Honolulu and I was fortunate to win the position of Senator representing Manoa, Makiki, Tantalus and Papakolea. At that time in 1980 Ann was in the Senate and I was in the House. She and I also were on the Neighborhood Board at the same time in 1978. Next, we both ran for the Legislature. I ran and won a seat in the House and she ran and won a seat in the Senate. During my tenure in the Senate I have Chaired the Consumer Protection Committee during the years 1998 – 2000 and 2007. I also have Chaired the Ways and Means Committee between 2000 and 2006. More recently I

have Chaired the Judiciary Committee 2007 – 2010 and in the year 2017. Finally, I have been the Chairman of the Labor Committee between the year 2018 to the present.

(HS) You undoubtedly know that at the end of this year Ann Kobayashi will be retiring and she will have been in various positions for 30 years. Are you thinking of retiring any time soon?

(BT) Laughter Yes, I have been thinking about retiring, although I am not sure. We have talked about it for probably the last two years. In the year 2022 there is going to be a new district. In the zero years like we are in now, 2020, there is a new census. This of course determines the number of people living in each area. Then in the one year, 2021, the State gets together with the census data and they end up drawing a new map of the districts. That will end up reflecting the new size and population in each district. In the two year, 2022, the new maps are incorporated into that year's election. Eight years ago, in 2012, Oahu lost a Senate seat to the Big island. As a result, two districts were consolidated and Carol Fukunaga and I had to run against each other in a new single district. I won the race, but fortunately Carol won a City Council seat and has been there since. In 2022 I may be looking at a similar situation where the district map will be redrawn and more consolidation could occur.

(HS) Where do you live in Manoa now?

(BT) I live on Armstrong Street. The house and lot belonged to my grandparents on the Ichiki side of the family.

(HS) Is it the part off of University Avenue or East Manoa Road?

(BT) It is actually in between. Do you know where Liloa Rise comes down? That goes right into my drive way so I have a long drive way. That lot used to be my Ichiki grandfather's 20,000 square foot lot; very large. When he died they had to sell the front house and they built a small cottage in the back for my grandmother. She retained that flag lot and someone else lives in the front house.

(HS) Did anyone on your family end up on Pamoia Road?

(BT) No. On the side of the Pamoia Road lot there is a drainage ditch. Every time there was a heavy rain there was a flooding of the house. In 1970, my dad and mom sold that house because they couldn't take it anymore. At the time I was away at Monmouth College in Illinois. They ended up in a split-level condo in Makiki. My parents lived there for five or six years and then found another house up in Manoa.

(HS) Tell us of any unique or special experiences you have had in Manoa Valley.

(BT) For me when I used to walk from Manoa School to the Japanese School we used to be able to see the rain coming down the valley. You could be walking and not get wet, but the sheets of rain were a short distance away. I thought that was very cool.

(HS) What things or experiences do you miss the most, that no longer exist in Manoa Valley.

(BT) That's a good question. I guess when I used to go to Japanese School after regular school and there used to be what we called the Chinese store right next to the Japanese School building.

(HS) There was Toyos and Yanos right across the street from each other.

(BT) That's right. The Chinese store used to sell cracked seed and baseball cards and what we called red squid. We used to go there or to Toyo's before Japanese School started with our five cents and buy something to enjoy before school started. That's what I miss!

(HS) What do you think makes Manoa special?

(BT) That's another good question. I think it is the people and the people have a sense of taking care of the valley. You can't just live here and expect it shine on. It takes work and caring to keep the valley the way it is and the way we all want it to remain. I think there is a large recognition of that in the valley and that is one thing that makes my job easier. It is a sense that we all need to work at it and take care of it otherwise it is going to diminish from the way we love it.

(HS) What would you personally like to see preserved and or improved in the valley?

(BT) I like what you are doing with the oral histories. Once we have collected a good number of histories, we need to do something with them, perhaps exhibit them somewhere. Does that mean a building, a room or other venue?

(HS) Perhaps they could be bound and made available to people in a special place in Manoa Library.

(BT) That is a good idea. We need a way to perpetuate the collection of these oral histories for people to be able to enjoy in the future. I regret not talking more with my father and my grandparents. You always think that that can be done later and all of a sudden it is too late. Why did they do this and what happened to that. Since we are dealing with people in Manoa Valley, we should instill in the younger generation a sense of and a need to talk with their older generation to document important things about each of their family's histories and the history of the valley as it applied to them.

(HS) One thing we haven't talked about is your kids. How many kids do you have?

(BT) I have two children. I have a daughter Karli and a son Daniel. They are both older. I have three grand kids and another coming at the end of August. The oldest is Roycen and he currently goes to Noelani School. He will be in fifth grade next year.

(HS) They are lucky knowing how special Manoa Valley is to grow up in.

(BT) My son and his family are fortunate in that they live in a cottage on our property on Armstrong Street. My daughter and her husband are at our house almost daily because Roycen goes to school and plays sports in the valley

(HS) Well, that is pretty much all of the formal questions we ask on these oral histories. Are there any other things that we might have missed that you want to get out there?

(BT) No, I think we have covered a lot of ground.

(HS) I want to thank you for all you do for the valley in your position as our Senator. Thank you so much for making yourself available for us to chronical your life's story. Aloha and mahalo!