

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Sarah Richards

"What the board of the SFCA wanted in a successor [to Alfred Preis] was an administrator, someone with breadth to manage the many diverse activities of the agency. The board members wanted more awareness of the operations of the agency as a whole and the decisions being made. They wanted someone to establish better relations with the legislature and someone who could handle the strong opinions from within the arts community."

Sarah Richards was born on December 31, 1941, in Sullivan, Indiana and graduated from Washington High School in 1959. A gifted vocalist, Richards was awarded a four-year scholarship to the College-Conservatory of Music in Cincinnati, Ohio. However, after one year at the conservatory she transferred to DePauw University in order to get a broader education. Richards graduated from DePauw University in 1963 with degrees in English and music, then taught both subjects in the public schools in Denver, Colorado for two years. She then spent a year traveling and studying in Europe.

In 1966 Richards entered Indiana University and in two years completed the requirements for master's degrees in higher education administration and counseling psychology. She then worked as dean of women at Albion College in Michigan until 1970, when she became dean of students at Honolulu's Chaminade College.

Richards became involved with the Hawai'i Opera Theatre soon after her arrival in Hawai'i. She eventually served as its president from 1976 to 1980. Richards left Chaminade University in 1980 to become executive director of the State Foundation on Culture and the Arts, a position she held until she became executive director of the Hawai'i Theatre Center in 1989.

NOTES FROM UNRECORDED INTERVIEW

with

Sarah Richards

November 2, 1990; December 18, 1990; and March 8, 1991

Honolulu, O'ahu

BY: Joe Rossi

Sarah Richards was born on December 31, 1941, in the small town of Sullivan, Indiana. At the age of three, she and her family moved to Washington, Indiana.

Her father, William Lawrence Marks, a graduate of Indiana University, worked as a branch manager for General Finance Company. Her mother, Dorothy Ruth Stratton, graduated from DePauw University with a degree in English.

A major influence in Richards' early life was her maternal grandmother, an accomplished pianist and gifted watercolorist who graduated from Saint Mary's of the Woods College in 1901 as a music and fine arts major. At her encouragement, Richards began studying the piano at the age of five. Richards also began singing at an early age, and she and her grandmother often performed together at informal gatherings. According to Richards, "I learned the love and joy of music from her and how music can be a very important part of a person's life."

Richards feels that she has always been stronger in the performing arts than the visual arts, and in music, her singing has always been stronger than her piano playing. Her mother was also a good vocalist, a soprano who took part in local performances and shows. Richards began to study voice seriously at the age of thirteen. She was happy singing in vocal competitions and won those that she entered. She placed first in the state vocal competitions in her sophomore, junior, and senior years of high school. She also studied voice as a high school student at Indiana University during her summer vacations and attended Interlochen National Music Camp in the summer of 1958.

After graduating from Washington High School in 1959, Richards was awarded a four-year scholarship to the College-Conservatory of Music in Cincinnati, Ohio. The curriculum in her freshman year included music theory, piano, voice lessons, and foreign languages, but no standard liberal arts courses. While Richards loved music and was doing well in the school, she knew that she wanted a broader education and needed to attend a liberal arts college. After her freshman year in Cincinnati, she transferred to DePauw University, where she graduated in 1963 with degrees in English and music. She also taught on the staff at Interlochen National Music Camp during the summers of 1962 and 1963.

After graduating from college, Richards moved to Denver, Colorado. From 1963 to 1965, Richards taught English and vocal music to seventh, eighth, and ninth graders in the

Jefferson County public school system. During her summer vacations in 1964 and 1965, she taught at Kamehameha Schools on O'ahu. Originally Kamehameha Schools had hired her to teach creative writing, but due to poor enrollment she taught swimming instead.

From 1965 to 1966, Richards taught English as a second language at the Briam Institute in Spain, studied art history at the Prado Museum in Madrid, and traveled throughout Europe.

Upon returning to the United States in 1966, Richards enrolled in Indiana University and in two years completed the requirements for master's degrees in higher education administration and counseling psychology. While studying at Indiana University she was part of the Student Personnel Program and, as part of the program, worked as assistant head resident in a large, coed dormitory.

After graduating from Indiana University in 1968, Richards was hired as dean of women at Albion College in Michigan. "I thoroughly loved college administration. It was an exciting time to be in the field because the question of what a university's role should be was being examined intensely."

Richards spent two years at Albion College. In 1970, at a national meeting of college administrators, she learned that Chaminade College in Honolulu was looking for a new dean of students. Richards applied for the position and flew out to Hawai'i to interview for it and for positions at other local institutions. Richards was offered the position at Chaminade College and accepted it. "I wanted to live in Hawai'i because it was a stimulating, cosmopolitan community with different cultural groups, values, customs, and arts. Honolulu had a small-town demeanor that was attractive to someone from a small town, but because of its unique location, it also provided an opportunity to meet the many interesting people who regularly pass through Hawai'i while travelling to other places." In addition to serving as dean of students at Chaminade College, Richards taught in the freshmen seminar program at Hawai'i Loa College.

Six months after her arrival in Hawai'i in 1970, Richards became involved with the Hawai'i Opera Theatre. "After reading an article in one of the local newspapers introducing me to the community, Mary Ho called me at Chaminade and asked me to lunch. Over lunch, Mary told me that she wanted me to help her with the educational efforts of the opera. I soon became education chair for the Hawai'i Opera Theatre. My first step as education chair was to take opera into the shopping malls. These initial projects went well. Then I was asked to join the board of the opera theatre. I later became secretary of the Hawai'i Opera Theatre, then vice president, and finally president in 1976. After about a year as president, I determined that the opera theatre had to be independent of the Honolulu Symphony in order to survive artistically and financially. Previously the opera theatre had been a division of the symphony. What was needed was an amicable split."

The Hawai'i Opera Theatre went on to establish its own independent organization, but maintained close ties with the Honolulu Symphony. "The Hawai'i Opera Theatre has thrived under its own direction and become a highly regarded regional opera company."

Richards remained president of the Hawai'i Opera Theatre and dean of students at Chaminade College until 1980, the year she was named executive director of the State Foundation on Culture and the Arts [SFCA]. She first heard about the SFCA position while attending a luncheon, where she was told that Alfred Preis was retiring and the organization was looking for a replacement. Her associates in the arts community soon encouraged her to apply.

Richards' knowledge of the SFCA at the time was limited, so she tried to find out more about the agency. "I talked to several people knowledgeable about the SFCA and its operations and was told that the agency did not have a high profile among arts groups and the community as a whole. Those who knew the most about the SFCA gave a lot of credit to Alfred, especially for the 1 percent program [i.e., Art in Public Places]. The agency was Alfred. What the board of the SFCA wanted in a successor was an administrator, someone with breadth to manage the many diverse activities of the agency. The board members wanted more awareness of the operations of the agency as a whole and the decisions being made. They wanted someone to establish better relations with the legislature and someone who could handle strong opinions from within the arts community."

Richards assumed the position of executive director on August 1, 1980. "The first thing I wanted to do was learn as much as possible about what the agency was and what it could be. I wanted to see it in relation to state government and the legislature, other state arts agencies, and the National Endowment for the Arts [NEA]. Our job was to be an advocate for all the arts groups, and the best way to do that was to increase significantly public support for the arts. You accomplish this by getting more resources for the arts, offering moral and informational support to arts groups, and maintaining a high profile for Hawai'i's arts at the national level."

One of her early goals was to establish rapport with key members of the legislature and get them to accept the idea that Art in Public Places was a valuable program. "I worked hard the first couple of years to get them to realize this, that they should be proud of Art in Public Places and not kick it around." To aid this effort, the SFCA staged an exhibit in several rooms at the state capitol to let the legislators see for themselves the body of the Art in Public Places collection. "The more art you see, the more you appreciate it. After about two years, the 1 percent program was not endangered."

Another early priority for Richards was incorporating a history and humanities program into the SFCA's existing structure. When Richards joined the agency in 1980, it had just been given this added responsibility after the legislature dissolved the Hawai'i Foundation for History and the Humanities [HFHH] earlier that year. And although the legislature had transferred the authority for two staff positions from HFHH to the SFCA, it had not provided any program money. In addition, Alfred Preis, lacking necessary staff, had filled the two positions with much needed accounting and secretarial personnel. "My job was to incorporate history and the humanities with no money or positions. I asked the legislature for program money to be added to our budget for this work. I asked for an amount in six figures and was eventually given \$20,000."

Richards then hired a consultant to do a study and advise the SFCA on establishing a

history and humanities program. Since there was another humanities organization at work in the state—the Hawai'i Committee for the Humanities [HCH]—a primary question was what the SFCA's relationship with that body should be. Richards met with HCH representatives and explored the idea of a merger, but HCH wanted to remain autonomous. Richards then worked at getting authorization from the legislature to establish a new staff position, humanities specialist. When the position was approved, Arnold Hiura was hired. He and Richards then presented a plan for history and humanities to the legislature, but soon learned that the legislature was reluctant to add additional funds for the new program. "I embraced history and the humanities, but wouldn't do so at the expense of the arts. Instead of cutting the pie into more [and therefore smaller] pieces, make the pie bigger."

Richards was eventually able to secure a small amount of additional funding from the legislature, and history and the humanities were incorporated into the agency. Through the humanities specialist, the agency has initiated a number of special programs, services, and seminars.

In 1983, the SFCA added another new program, Folk Arts. "The origins for the Folk Arts program come from a meeting I had with Bess Hawes, the director of folk arts at the national level. Bess was interested in establishing folk arts coordinator positions within state arts agencies across the country, so I pursued this and wrote for a grant to establish such a position within the SFCA. For the first four years federal money paid for the position, and then we were able to get state money to maintain the position after that."

"The Folk Arts program at the agency developed an outstanding *paniolo* exhibit and accompanying catalogue and helped coordinate Hawai'i's participation in the Festival of Pacific Arts held in Tahiti in 1985 and in the Smithsonian Institution's Festival of American Folklife held in 1989. Additionally, an outstanding audio cassette of Hawaiian *paniolo* music was produced, and the agency was a champion for four members of the state receiving National Heritage Fellowships in hula, quilt making, slack key guitar, and Hawaiian music."

In 1983, *The Economic Impact of Hawai'i's Non-Profit Arts and Cultural Organizations*, a study funded by the SFCA and conducted by the Arts Council of Hawai'i, was released. "The objective of this study was to find another argument for getting support for the arts from the legislature and to document the impact which non-profit arts organizations have on Hawai'i's economy." Richards characterizes the economic study as a collaborative effort between the SFCA and the Arts Council of Hawai'i. Although the arts council disbanded in 1989, Richards feels that it still has a role to play. "The arts council had a hard time defining its mission. I found them helpful in getting support for the arts at the legislature and useful as a conduit for the SFCA. We could give them money to do something, but still have some control over how it was done. They also held workshops and were a rallying point for arts groups on the neighbor islands, especially in the early days."

According to Richards, the primary tasks of the SFCA were: to award public funding for arts organizations and activities in all discipline areas; to commission and purchase works of art through the Art in Public Places program; to administer specialty areas such as history and the humanities or folk arts; and to undertake initiatives such as the economic

impact study, development of a statewide arts newsletter, and coordination of Hawai'i's participation in the Festival of Pacific Arts or the Smithsonian Institution's Festival of American Folklife. Richards managed her budget with this framework in mind. "As director, you have to make sure that dollars are available for all programs, but that doesn't mean that all areas need to be funded in the same manner. If the state didn't provide the money to do something, we got it from federal or private sources."

Upon her arrival, the SFCA was a member of the Consortium for Pacific Arts and Cultures [CPAC], a collaboration between the government arts agencies in Alaska, American Samoa, California, Guam, the Northern Marianas, and Hawai'i. "Hawai'i and Alaska worked hard together, but the interests of all the participants were so diverse that there really was no common ground. When CPAC couldn't get its NEA grant, SFCA withdrew along with California and Alaska. But Hawai'i could benefit tremendously from being associated with other state arts agencies. We needed to belong to a regional organization, so we joined WESTAF [Western States Arts Federation]."

"The main reason for belonging to a regional body is the significant networking that results. This is vital. Being hooked up with other bodies helps you understand sources of funding and allows you to see what your colleagues are doing and how they are solving similar problems. Other reasons to join are that it allows Hawai'i to partake in regional programs, such as visual arts exhibitions and book awards. For Hawai'i to be hooked up with colleagues in the western U.S. allows us to learn things and have a broader influence. For example, WESTAF brought the museum program director for the NEA to a regional meeting several years ago. I met him at this meeting and lobbied to get him to come to Hawai'i. He came here and met many people locally. Some of those people have since served on NEA panels, others have increased their funding from the NEA."

In April 1986, the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* published a series of front-page articles on the SFCA. The articles were generally critical of SFCA operations and Richards' role as executive director. A common complaint in the articles was that the agency—and Richards—tended to favor Western arts over ethnic arts. "I felt victimized. If people perceived that I was favoring Western art forms, this was an inaccurate perception. I love Western art forms, but a look at my record with the SFCA will show that most of the programs I initiated were not in the Western arts. We even did an in-house study to examine how SFCA funds were spent from 1975 to 1985 and found that support for non-Western arts had increased while support for Western arts stayed about the same. The articles' claims were just not true. With regards to art selections, I always brought a committee with me to shows to select works [for the Art in Public Places program]. The artists' peers made the decision. I only had one vote. My job [as executive director] was to moderate and make sure that it was a fair hearing. The accusations against me were not true, and the board didn't know what to do in response."

Another frustration for Richards was the sometimes tense relationship between her and SFCA staff members. This also became the subject of media interest. "Some staff did not communicate what may have been bothering them. I did not feel it was the whole staff, but I was deeply troubled by the situation and open to remedies."

"I was very committed to the agency and thought that we were doing an excellent job. I

wanted to get through the negativism and get on with things." Richards feels that there was nothing specific in the accusations made against her. "[The *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* series] reported the perceptions of some people in the community. The board should have defined the issues if the newspaper failed to do so. They should have fired the executive director if they found fault. If no fault was found, they should have stood behind her."

The nine-member board of the SFCA is composed of volunteers appointed by the governor from the community at-large. Richards sees the board's role as both setting policy for the SFCA and acting as an advocate for the agency, particularly in the political arena.

"Individual members come with varying levels of expertise and experience. Oftentimes people were appointed for political reasons and not due to their knowledge of subject matter. Some had private agendas. A good board member is someone who understands the overall thrust of the agency, can make decisions and sort out policy issues, has a knowledge of and passion for the arts, and has no axe to grind."

"Fortunately, the SFCA has been blessed to have some very good board members. [Masaru] 'Pundy' Yokouchi made many contributions because he had the historical perspective, could sort out the major issues, and was very effective in supporting the SFCA at the legislature. Margaret Cameron and David Penhallow were passionate about the value of the arts in every person's life and very supportive of excellent art activities occurring on their respective islands. Lucille Cooper brought the perspective of a working visual artist, and Wayne Chang contributed an important perspective as a *kumu hula*. Naomi Morita had a good understanding of arts in education. Franklin Odo's initial orientation as a trouble-making renegade was greatly improved when he had to assume the responsibility of chairman of the foundation, and I felt that we maintained a very good working relationship."

When Richards joined the SFCA in 1980, George Ariyoshi was governor of the state. Six years into her tenure, John Waihee was elected governor. "George Ariyoshi was very proud of the SFCA. He did not interfere and was very supportive, but he was fiscally conservative. Things opened up when Waihee became governor. If you can get him excited about something, he will support it."

In 1989, Richards announced her resignation as executive director of the SFCA effective September 22 of that year. "The SFCA was number one in the nation in per capita state support for the arts; new legislation [Senate Bill 1140 of 1989] was passed to help the 1 percent law; I had requested and received \$100,000 for international cultural exchange activities; and new staff positions were added. I had done just about everything that could be done at the state level and had done much work at the NEA, NASAA [National Assembly of State Arts Agencies], and WESTAF levels. I was proud of SFCA's accomplishments. I tried to do whatever I could to resolve problems with the staff, but came to the realization that some of the staff simply had a personal vendetta. It was not in their interests to resolve the problems. Until the end they could not define their problems and dissatisfactions. I had to ask myself, was this a stimulating, invigorating environment? The answer in some cases was no."

Richards feels that her accomplishments while part of the SFCA speak for themselves. "I took some personal heat, but managed to put in place a number of programs that are still

working well." She believes the agency was stronger at her departure than when she arrived. "SFCA took a giant step forward. We are now a leader and a mover."

What the future holds for the SFCA, however, is not clear to Richards. "I don't see that SFCA has established a compelling direction. I hope they don't get bogged down in details or maintain an inward focus. They have to work to let people know that the SFCA is there and cares. The SFCA must keep a strong presence in the community. The agency can have an energy and a life that is vital."

Richards believes that one of the major issues for the SFCA in the nineties will be the support of cultural facilities in the state, such as the Maui Community Arts and Cultural Center, the Palace Theater in Hilo, and the Hawai'i Theatre Center in Honolulu. She also believes that the SFCA will have to continue to nurture and assist both established and emerging arts organizations and maintain high standards for quality in all the arts.

"Enough hasn't been done yet for the development and support of arts in Hawaiian and Filipino cultures. The keepers of the traditions must be cultivated and cared for so the traditions will be preserved. In hula they must keep the real, not the theatrical. The Bishop Museum as well has a major role to play in preserving the Hawaiian culture and arts. As far as the visual arts, there need to be more outlets for Hawai'i artists to show their work. The DOE [Department of Education] needs to be more committed to providing arts education as part of the regular curriculum, sequentially from primary to secondary school, taught by instructors who are qualified."

Richards left the SFCA to become executive director of the Hawai'i Theatre Center, a non-profit organization formed in 1984 to restore the historic landmark as a state-of-the-art multi-purpose performance center. "It is currently a \$20.8 million project, with funding split 50-50 between public and private sources. It is a huge project, but rewarding. It's about economic development and historic preservation, as well as providing cultural and performing facilities which are vitally needed today in Honolulu."

**The State Foundation
on Culture and the Arts**

An Oral History

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