

## BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Wendell Silva

*"I'm being motivated to try to indicate Hawai'i as an arts center of the Pacific. I called it an arts capitol of the Pacific. Perhaps it's too grandiose a perspective, but I don't think it is an unrealistic perspective based upon what I see, and what I see we have and what we have to share."*

Wendell Silva was born on March 17, 1943, in Honolulu. He graduated from St. Louis High School in 1961 and attended the University of Hawai'i, where he earned a bachelor's degree in sociology in 1966. Following college, Silva served for four years in the air force.

In the early 1970s, Silva worked as city project coordinator for the Meals on Wheels program in Honolulu. He later became part of Kalihi-Palama Culture and Arts Society, Inc. and served as the organization's executive director until 1989, when he became executive director of the State Foundation on Culture and the Arts.

Silva is an accomplished musician, vocalist, and composer. He is also a founding member of the State Council on Portuguese Heritage and the founder of the annual Queen Lili'uokalani Keiki Hula Competition.

Tape No. 20-30-1-91 and 20-31-1-91

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Wendell Silva (WS)

April 5, 1991

Honolulu, O'ahu

BY: Joe Rossi (JR)

JR: This is an interview with Wendell Silva, conducted April 5, 1991, in his Honolulu office. The interviewer is Joe Rossi.

Mr. Silva, to begin with, maybe you could tell me a little bit about yourself, where you were born, what year you were born, where you went to school.

WS: I was born March 17, 1943, in Honolulu, Hawai'i. I went to St. Louis High School [and graduated in] 1961, attended the University [of Hawai'i], graduated with a bachelor of arts in sociology in 1966.

JR: What elementary school did you go to?

WS: I went to St. Patrick's School in Kaimuki.

JR: I'm interested in your early exposure to the arts and involvement in the arts. Do you remember when you first became interested in music or started performing or composing songs?

WS: I was told that from a very early age I was always interested in music. My parents informed me that I particularly enjoyed operating a phonograph that they had and was able—I think they said before I was one year old—to sort out certain records that I had as favorite songs and would be able to operate the turntable. And it was an amazing type of—I think to them it was considered amazing for a child in that early stages of development. What they would do is when friends or relatives came over, they pointed out this particular, unique interest that I had. They would mix up the records, and I was able to, they say, sort out and find the ones that I particularly enjoyed. Or if they suggested a certain song, I was able to find it. But the ones that I enjoyed playing and the music that I enjoyed, they weren't able to determine exactly how I did it. And because I can't remember that, I guess I can't remember how—or I wouldn't know how I did it, too. But going that far back, I vaguely remember these 78 [RPM] records with colored labels. Perhaps it could be the colors, I don't know. Although they told me that several songs had the same colored labels, and I was still able to distinguish. So I guess at a very early age, as

far as music, that was one of the first indications of my interest in the arts.

JR: Do you remember the kind of music that it was that appealed to you? Was it Hawaiian music, was it pop music at the time, big band?

WS: According to what they told me, I had a special preference for ballads and also Hawaiian music.

JR: Were either of your parents musicians or performers?

WS: My father was a self-taught musician, and he's also a composer, and that's how I think I learned music, too. It was taught to us. . . . Like in playing the piano, I could play the piano very well by ear without having any musical training. And that was another thing that they discovered, and apparently I don't even recall how early it was when I acquired this ability. But I was told as a very young child I was able to sit in front of a piano and perform or duplicate or playback the melodies that I had heard. I remember as a very young child—I don't know how old I was—but sitting on my father's lap as he played, and he encouraged me to play along with him. We had one piano, and I guess we were able to really make good use of the piano by having four hands put forth music at the same time.

Another thing that was very interesting is that this was the days of the radio, too. I guess I'm dating myself.

JR: I think you already did that. (Chuckles)

WS: I guess so, with the 78 [RPM] records, yeah. One of the things that we had as a tradition with our family is that after my father came home from work, we'd gather around as he played the piano. There (were) always instruments—an ukulele, a guitar—and he would play. I could be able to pick up an instrument and accompany and follow along in whatever key he was playing because I had seemed to have that ability. And Mom would do so, and my brothers would gather around, and we would sing. A lot of the songs that I particularly enjoyed (were) my father's compositions. We got to sing them as a family. I think that tradition of gathering around and keeping ourselves—entertaining ourselves and sharing our talents was something that we carried on throughout our life. Even when I was in college—and even now, whenever we get together we do the same thing. They call it a jam session today. In our time we just did it because it was something that was joyful and enabled us to each contribute our talent as a family, collectively sharing that talent and enjoying it.

JR: Do you think your family was atypical or typical at the time, out of your friends' families and things like that?

WS: We had such a close family that I. . . . We never went to other people's homes and stayed there, so I didn't know. I know that when we got together in an extended-family situation that we also did the same thing. I guess some of our other family members didn't have the same type of talent that we had. But those that did,

contributed and complemented in their own way. I had an aunt who would join us in singing, another ukulele would come out, and aunts would begin dancing, and that's the way it was—and spontaneously, whatever inspired you or whatever you felt at the time. There was a comfortable and encouraging opportunity to express that.

JR: Were you interested in any of the other arts, visual arts or performing arts?

WS: Very interested in visual as well as other performing arts, but I always, perhaps, had more of a opportunity and a focus for the performance arts. I explored different arts, but I found that I was more comfortable and more interested in a specific discipline or aspect of the arts. I didn't feel that I was gifted, perhaps, as a visual artist, to be able to draw and create, you know, a beautiful work of art in the visual arts. And I did explore that. But in the performance arts, and in particular music and traditional arts—Hawaiian arts—I guess I had felt that I had sufficient capability that was nurtured by people that I either associated with or lived with.

JR: Outside the home, in school or at different events in the community, what was happening? Were you exposed to much arts through school?

WS: Well, I went to a private school, and we did have opportunities in the elementary school to sing. There was choir. There was an art class that was held. And basically, those were the only opportunities I had to explore the arts. But it wasn't a concentrated or specific skill-development type of curriculum item.

JR: Do you remember what kinds of events in the community that you may have attended? Now, I know people, for instance, this weekend are going to Hilo [to attend the Merrie Monarch Festival]. What was happening back then? Were there things like that?

WS: In the schools throughout Hawai'i there was no Hawaiian history or Hawaiian culture that was taught. I had to learn this by my association with people who were, fortunately, close to my family, who were talented in some way, that we associated with, that was able to share with me. All the things that I had learned was never taught in any learning institution at that time. Many of the things that I learned couldn't be taught in a learning institution at that time. It could, more appropriately, I guess, be shared only in its traditional form and in its traditional way. In those ways, I was able to develop, absorbing—and, I guess, being a person who already had a good ear for music. My senses as far as myself in music developed so that I could apply it in a traditional way, which is how the Hawaiians passed on a lot of their art forms and their culture.

For me, I think that as a young person the only opportunities that existed was to go to the theaters. Sometimes they had, in those days, young people's clubs and talent shows. (Chuckles) And I remember the old Love's Bakery—the Love's Bakery, I don't know if it's old. I think it's still in Kapahulu where we lived.

JR: Yeah, it's still there.

WS: They used to have a young people's talent showcase, and because we lived nearby, our family always entered. We took pride in having received many awards. One of the fun things we would do is, they would give away cakes—yeah, it was really wonderful. That's how I would go--I remember winning a cake for my brother's birthday, and being so proud that I had won the talent show. Mom didn't have to worry about making a cake, we had a finely decorated cake that. . . .

And I remember in the theaters, they had also young people's talent shows.

JR: Were these movie theaters you're talking about?

WS: Yes.

JR: So this would be prior to a movie, or instead of a movie, or. . . .

WS: Well, in those days they had like the Mickey Mouse Club, the Donald Duck—each theater had their own young people's club. Saturdays was the day designated for young people to go. Parents apparently loved it, because my mother and father really encouraged my family to go on Saturdays. It was a way of getting young people, for us, to do our chores, and the reward was—it used to cost a dime to go to the theater.

JR: Which theater did you go to?

WS: Because we lived in Kapahulu, the primary theater that we went to was Kapahulu Theatre, which I don't know if it's still in existence. But every theater had their own club.

JR: Okay.

WS: Normally, prior to the movie they had, as I said, a talent show, or they had games for young people to play, and they gave prizes. As far as the talent was concerned, again, the Silva family came out pretty well whenever we—I think we got more than our dime's worth with the toys and things that we came home with. For us it was just natural. I mean, we would go and. . . .

JR: Did you folks have matching aloha attire, or do you remember if you had uniforms for the family or anything like that?

WS: No, not for that type of a thing, primarily because we each had our own—we had our own preference as far as attire. We did have matching pants, though, and that was primarily our school pants. When we attended St. Patrick's we had a uniform, and so that was the primary color that we had as far as. . . . I remember khaki, it was khaki pants. Whenever we performed we had our three khaki pants on. We also made leis so that we at least had some semblance of being an identifiable group. Sometimes we entered solo too, in different areas, and sometimes we entered as a group. The reason we entered solo was because we thought we had more chances to win more prizes that way.

(Laughter)

WS: They had all different types of things. On Halloween they had a costume contest. During Hawaiian celebrations they had a Hawaiian theme. That's where I saw young people performing hulas and chants. We also enjoyed other people performing Japanese songs and singing country and western type of songs.

JR: That brings up an interesting question. Did you have an awareness of the other cultures, such as what the Japanese were doing or if the Filipinos were doing something?

WS: Very much so. In those days there were Japanese schools and Chinese schools that taught the language and writing as well as some of the cultural types of things. They didn't have any Hawaiian school, though. We came from a neighborhood that was all—integrated, I guess, would be the right word. We had a very comfortable relationship in sharing, not only as playmates in the neighborhood and as families but also—when it came to this type of culture sharing, we felt no hesitancy in being comfortable and being a part of another culture. My family used to attend even the *Bon* dances that they had in the different places. I've never (forgotten). We learned that dance very quickly, and we all had kimonos. (Chuckles) Really. There were a lot of Japanese at the *Bon* dance, but there were other ethnic groups too, and we always felt comfortable. One of the things that we liked was that's where you get the best saimin and the best barbecue. And it was just so tasty. I never forget that.

We even would sing---my father would play Japanese songs on the piano. When we went to a party—if we had a party at our house or we had guests over—he would play Japanese songs, Filipino songs, Portuguese songs, Puerto Rican songs. That's how I learned to sing a couple of Japanese songs. When we go to a Japanese teahouse party and they see this Hawaiian with an ukulele singing a Japanese song, they certainly appreciate it, even though I probably have a few words that may have sounded a little strange.

Also, during that time there was also some theaters that had adult talent shows where people would go and perform. For my family, the primary social activities, I think, at that time were associated either with our schools as young people or cultural events that were in our neighborhood. There was (a) place called the Sands in Waikiki, and they had terrific Hawaiian entertainment. They had a buffet dinner that was very reasonable. Yeah, I think it was only \$1.75, complete buffet, wonderful buffet right on Waikiki Beach. A lot of the Hawaiian entertainers performed there. They had an excellent show. And so we would also go and enjoy that type of presentations.

I think during my generation there was a lot of luaus. We had a lot of luaus, lot of Chinese dinners, lot of Japanese dinners. There was always some occasion where my family was invited, and whenever we went, we went as a family. And when you spoke of uniforms, I remember, because my mother had five children, and I remember all of us having the same matching aloha shirts, and she had the same

matching mu'umu'u. It was very, very nice to go as a family, but I think also it was a way in which my mom could pick us out in a crowd in case we wandered away. No problem losing one of us.

The 50th State Fair was another---it wasn't the 50th State Fair, it was the 49th State Fair.

JR: We weren't a state yet.

WS: No. There was a lot of cultural things that took place, also.

JR: Is it similar to how it is today, the fair?

WS: No, it's very different. In those days it was very different from what I see today. (I've never forgotten) one of the fairs, because my brother got lost. And it was held at Sand Island.

JR: Well, if they were different, how were they different?

WS: Well, I remember my father going for his company and having to man a booth and demonstrate. He worked for Hawaiian Telephone Company, so he had to demonstrate cable splicing and talk about the telephone and how it relates to, I guess, the community and what they were doing. There were a lot of different companies that had similar types of relationships, as an enterprise in Hawai'i and relating it close to the community. I found the type of exhibits (were) a little different from, perhaps, what I see today. Before, they had demonstrations, and they had people right from the community involved in their demonstrations and relating to the people that went to the fair. It was different. It was more, I guess, homegrown and grassroots. Hawai'i was at a time where industry was developing, and it was a good way of industry communicating really directly with their community.

JR: I had one more question about your background, and then we can move up to your involvement with Kalihi-Pālama. I noticed that when you went to the UH [University of Hawai'i] you went into sociology and not music or some other field. I was curious about that.

WS: I guess I felt always an identity with trying to be a part of helping society in one way or another, and I think that I felt I had a way of contributing to Hawai'i's society. I think that field was something that attracted me because I wanted to make the environment and the world that I was a part of one that would be as positive and as enriching as possible, not only for myself but for others. I think because of my family background, we were very. . . . And it could be because of my Hawaiian background, I don't know. But my family had always been very, very warm. We love people. There (were) always people, always, always people coming to my grandmother's home or our home and coming together and enjoying being with one another in a very meaningful way.

My grandmother—well, my Hawaiian grandmother—had a home on a homestead, and we lived there for awhile when one of our homes was being built. I've never (forgotten), because her door was never locked. Any stranger that was in the area who was lost and came to ask directions was extended a very cordial type of invitation, not simply giving directions. You could sense that they were thirsty or they were frightened about actually where they were, we always put forth and extend every courtesy and hospitality to make these people feel welcome. That's something that was always a part of the family.

In the area—Waimānalo—my grandmother was one of the first pioneers, as we called her, and we helped in Waimānalo as a family. In those days I remember really coming together as a community. My uncle worked in a store called Piggly Wiggly. I don't think it's in existence now here. But during Christmastime, because we felt that we were fortunate and wanted to share, we'd get together with neighbors. I remember all of us—my family would get together and they would contribute towards a purchase of cases of apples and oranges. We would, as young people, be responsible for putting together Christmas packages.

There was no Santa Claus parade in that rural area. It was kind of remote and underdeveloped—undeveloped (chuckles). And a lot of the families were very large. And so our task, as young people, was to have these brown lunch bags, and in the lunch bag—I remember we had this table, and my grandmother would open up the case, and we were responsible for packaging. There was an apple, an orange, assorted mixed nuts—walnuts—and balloons. We went and got donations from wherever we could, from the store nearby, and we put together these packages. In place of the Santa Claus parade—my uncle was a volunteer fire(man). There was a volunteer fire squad. It wasn't, I think, an official one. And so they dressed—I remember one of my family members serving as Santa Claus. And they would go on the fire truck. Instead of throwing candy, what we would do is—I remember riding with my uncle in a car—a police car—in front of the fire truck, and we would deliver these packages of fruits and nuts to the rest of the community.

And so I think those social skills—or not social skills, but that social commitment and community commitment was something that also was very much a part of our family. We were very involved in working as a community and getting to know one another. And in those days, perhaps, it was small enough that you could feel the sense of community, and being in a remote area, it was certainly much more conducive to that type of a thing happening.

But even in the city, in Kaimukī, where we lived—which was called a city at that time, too—our neighborhood was very, very close. There was always a sharing of everything. My mother would make sweetbread and take it over, and my granny would make sweetbread, and the neighbor would come over with *limu kohu* and poi and *'ōpelu*. There was a tradition that whatever was sent in a bowl, the bowl never came back empty, you know.

JR: Yeah.



WS: So back and forth. I mean, a pot of soup came back with a pot of fruit. That was my upbringing. And perhaps that's why, I think, I chose that [i.e., sociology], because I felt that was important, and it had a very pleasant—a good feeling for me.

JR: When did you first become involved with Kalihi-Pālama Culture and Arts Society?

WS: As a transition from the interest in sociology, after serving in the military I had. . . . Right after getting discharged—this was during the Vietnam War era—I secured a job at Lanakila Crafts working with the handicapped. I was a vocational counselor initially, and later became the pioneer in developing the meals for the elderly project in Hawai'i, which became a number-one nationwide model. I applied a very different concept to the program. Nationally they were experimenting with this Meals on Wheels type of project, and so Hawai'i decided to also—I think they had gotten some federal money to explore how to go about doing it in Hawai'i. What I did was I developed the lunch wagon approach. And that was very unique to the program, because nationally no one had never, I guess, thought of that concept.

JR: So you drove the . . .

WS: Yeah, I drove this (chuckles) big wagon with lunches. Because there was a study done in the Kalihi area that ascertained that there were many elderly people who were economically disadvantaged and weren't getting proper nutrition, we felt that that was the area that we should concentrate our efforts. The lunch wagons in those days and the food wagons were something that, for us in Hawai'i, we felt very comfortable with. And usually lunch wagon food had a reputation of having very generous and tasty portions. (Chuckles) Because I knew that our local people wouldn't hesitate, you know, in coming to a lunch wagon and getting a lunch, I used that concept.

I had in big orange and green letters "Free Meals" or something—(I've forgotten) exactly what it said. That's how the lunch program developed. I would drive that lunch wagon—oh, and this is funny—right on 'A'ala Park. We would serve in 'A'ala Park. I could drive in almost—and have access to—any situation, in addition to a congregate dining setting, which I developed in a luau fashion to begin with, because we had, I guess, not enough monies for tables. The only way I could get it going inexpensively is to get donated wood, and we fashioned luau-type tables which were portable. The luau is something that our local people also have no hesitancy and would feel very comfortable attending that type of an environment. So I used that. Being a person who also was talented—and entertaining, also, at the time—I had gotten a lot of the top entertainers in Hawai'i to come and join me on the lunch wagon. I would drive them around, and we would put on a hula show in Chinatown. All the elderly would come and see the show. Then I'd serve them free meals. (Chuckles) They enjoyed it, and I enjoyed it.

JR: Oh, I bet they did.

WS: Oh, yes. Some people followed that lunch wagon all over the island, let me tell you, all over Kalihi. But I always would do that. So again, in sociology, that's perhaps another related type of career opportunity that I had. From Lanakila Crafts, one of the things I developed—or I did—was I did a report that documented some of the needs. This was, I think, the first information on elderly and elderly nutrition and gerontology that was ever documented. It was even used at the University [of Hawai'i]. I remember [Professor] Tony Lenzer using it as a resource. But in the documentation and in the—I did I guess what you would call a survey, a questionnaire and interview, and got data and statistics that indicated that there were more than just nutritional needs of the elderly that were very important to a congregate dining setting. I could understand that because of my family background. We had determined that there was some social isolation that also existed, and there was a definite need for—there was, in addition, physical isolation. They were all related to economic as well as the nutritional type of problems that some elderly had. Sometimes when you're all alone you don't really have an appetite, but if you're at a luau and you see a lot of people that are enjoying, then your appetite sometimes gets better.

One of the things I discovered was that there was a need for social and recreational opportunities as part of the congregate dining experience. It wasn't a matter of just bringing people together and sitting down and eating. The social experience was also very much important to, I think, the overall program. And as such, I developed a component to meet those needs. In those days the new components were subcontracted to different agencies in the community capable of handling that. The social-recreational component contract was awarded to Kalihi-Pālama Culture and Arts [Society].

I was exploring an opportunity of returning to school, and the director of the Kalihi-Pālama Culture and Arts Society informed me that, "Oh, since you developed the component," and there was a need for someone to implement it, if I would consider—in the interim, until I made up my mind and formally applied to go back to school—to help develop the program. So I said okay. Before you knew it that program also grew, and it grew into other things. I developed an arts program for the prison system, perhaps tying in again with my sociology interests and background.

And Kalihi-Pālama Culture and Arts [Society] was originally a Model Cities project, funded under the Model Cities program. But this was set up in conjunction with the State Foundation on Culture and the Arts [SFCA] in those days to serve as an extension for the state agency directly into a community environment.

There were two model programs that were developed by the state foundation utilizing the Model Cities funding. One was a demonstration project in an urban situation, which was designated as the Kalihi-Pālama Culture and Arts Project. This particular community was chosen primarily because it was designated federally as a below-poverty-level, low-income, underprivileged area, with a concentration of approximately eleven public housing projects in a very urban setting. A counterpart—a sister project—was established on a demonstration basis

in a rural setting. That sister project was the Wai'anae Coast Culture and the Arts [Project]. So basically we served with the understanding that we were, as far as the state foundation, an extension of their services directly to a community, and providing culture and arts—educationally oriented culture and artistically enriching experiences for these people in these two demonstration project areas.

The Kalihi area, as I said, was particularly unique because of its high concentration of low-income housing projects. As far as the people's access and exposure to artistic events, this was one of the things that was needed to be addressed. Many of the people in that community were not comfortable, because they had their own ethnic background, and they weren't exposed to some of the finer Western arts experiences. This was something that we needed to try to achieve. So it was the intent that we would provide that exposure for these people. We discovered that sometimes an exposure or the implementation of a project that was designated by another culture in another organization outside of the community was not reasonable or feasible. I recall a concert being organized and coordinated in one of the housing project facilities, and there were only like eight people that could understand and relate to the experience.

JR: This was like classical music?

WS: Yeah, yeah. However, we found that if we put in and supplemented that type of an exposure with an event or with an art form that they could identify with, we found the attendance increased and financially it was a better way of getting cost-effective results for your investment. So actually what had happened is that the community then decided that—and the board of the Kalihi-Pālana Culture and Arts [Society] consisted of members from the community. They themselves decided that if they're going to be responsible for assisting the community, they should also reflect the needs and interests of that community and, as such, should have a very important role in working with the community, as well as other organizations, to best satisfy those needs and to present the best experience possible. They organized themselves and incorporated themselves into a private, non-profit organization which was funded through Model Cities and eventually funded through the state. So what had happened was an extension became an independent entity, still serving as an extension but as an independent entity, a community responding to community needs and meeting those needs.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

WS: I remember at the---I told you the Love's Bakery one [i.e., talent show]. And Meadow Gold [Dairies] used to also, I think, join in with the Love's Bakery showcase. And there was a lady, she was known as the Storybook Lady. She would read a story to all of the kids. It was just. . . . We would gather around and were fascinated. She'd take this big book up and read a fairy tale. And I really enjoyed

that.

But getting back to Kalihi-Pālama Culture and Arts [Society], advancing in time. We are now into contemporary Hawai'i. (Chuckles) Basically that's how we got started. We eventually became so successful in handling programs dealing with the elderly—because this hadn't been done. There was no specific program geared specifically to seniors, who were the forefathers of Hawai'i as it exists today. These are our forebearers. These are people that still have direct links with traditions that spanned hundreds of years. I found that some of our seniors, though, had such a difficult time just surviving in their generation, working their soul and their heart out for the sake of providing a better future and a better lifestyle for their children and their grandchildren, that a lot of these people didn't have the opportunity to sit down and practice and learn their culture, except, perhaps, if they had it in a family situation. I discovered that a lot of our Hawaiian men and women—and also, I guess in the Hawaiian culture it was discouraged to really speak Hawaiian. That's how come I really didn't learn to speak Hawaiian, but I can understand a little bit. Because they were so busy working, music and other types of things became, I guess, a secondary priority in your life. But now that they were at this—I called it golden years—there was an opportunity to learn, reidentify yourself with your heritage.

I took that opportunity of developing this type of a program for the senior citizens that were with the meals program. I had found that within the pool of people that were attending our program, we had some genuine treasures that also didn't have a chance to share their knowledge because they, too, had to put their culture in a secondary stage for the sake of their families and providing bread and butter for their family. In some cases, you know, we're talking a generation that goes back to the Depression years, and so it was a difficult time for them. The program that I developed was very successful and it grew. It grew to a magnitude beyond my expectations, as far as now being a full statewide type of effort.

In developing the prison program---being from Kalihi-Pālama—and the prison was situated in our geographic boundaries—many of the people in prison had relatives in our community. And they came to me and they told me, they said, "Oh, you know, we have so and so, and there's nothing in there. And he's so talented. He's very good in drawing." Or, "He's always been a very talented musician. Is there something you can do to help?"

It's not easy to go into prison and say, "We would like to help inmates," or in those days prisoners, as they were called. They had different terms throughout the time that I was involved with them for addressing their status. For an outside agency who was a little community agency to go into the system and say we would like to provide programs for you was not easy. There was a cautious questioning about whether we could fulfill this commitment, and whether we would disrupt the organization as it had been structured already, and how would this affect the guards and the security. There was a lot of concerns, and I could understand that. But basically, the facility was in our community. And I recall that there was a survey done which indicated that a large percentage of the resident population in

the facility was also residents of our community. And as such, I felt we had an obligation to try to provide an opportunity to expose these gentlemen to arts as an alternative to sports-oriented recreational activities.

I was at that time, with the director of the agency—I was only a coordinator—we were really questioned as to whether there would be a response to art. And I said, “Well, we’ll find out. Let’s give it a try. Let us go in and set up a project on a demonstration basis. You give us so many weeks to see what develops. We will comply with all security concerns. We will comply with anything. But just give us a chance to show you and also to learn for ourselves whether this is something that is workable and is a need that we can help with as a community agency.”

So we were given an opportunity to conduct the workshop. I brought in the best that there was available who would be willing to work in a prison environment.

JR: Are you talking . . .

WS: Best artists, instructors.

JR: Visual artists?

WS: Visual, performance, you name it, folk artists. I decided that we should explore all different kinds, and the visual arts was the first. To my surprise, forty inmates or residents showed up for an art class. And we were prepared for eight.

(Laughter)

WS: We didn’t have supplies for forty people. But they were fascinated, and they wanted more. The guards were stunned to see such a response, and how to handle the security of the situation. But they had found that the experience was very positive and that it was also helpful to the workers there too, to see this alternative talents being developed and explored in a positive way, and also a recognition that there are some very artistically talented people that were within the population. So anyway, that program grew also.

And then, because we had such beautiful artworks that had come out of our workshops, they needed to be shared. This facet of the prison system needed to be exposed, that the gift of beauty can exist in everyone, or anyone who wants to develop it and express it in a certain way. So I then developed an art exhibit. The first art exhibit of prison art—let’s see, where was that? I believe it was held in the federal courthouse gallery. It was interesting because judges who had passed sentence on some of the inmates got to see some of the results, in one way, and some very positive things that surprised them. So that grew into another statewide type of effort, too.

At Kalihi-Pālama, different community groups had seen the type of programming and the type of services—quality, professional, very authentic traditionally, and artistically very high-quality type of programs that was being [put] in place for the

community. And I tell you, there's so many creative types of things that we could come up with as a community and implement as a community. I got the whole community involved. You'd be surprised the number of people that were involved, that gave of themselves to do something for the community. I guess that's another facet or talent that I feel very comfortable with. In that particular community, although 'A'ala Park was considered very notorious in those days—and I think now it still has some sort of reputation as far as the park is concerned. But for us, that was the place in the community where we could come together as a community and really enjoy it with families and celebrate culturally different things. So I had festivals, art shows, you name it. We had Filipino culture and art, and we had a good multi-ethnic type of arts program. We had also had a good fine-arts exposure program, visual and performance.

The community seemed to feel that at that time there was a need to prioritize Hawaiian culture—the host culture—because a lot of the arts were dying. And Mr. [Alfred] Preis, who was with the state foundation, also recognized that and developed a program. He had a state dance master and tried to continue the traditional ancient hula, which at that time was not shared like how it is today. Very few performances would you see, and very few people had the interest or were concerned, because of conflicting values, to carry on the ancient art. Because of the Hollywood influence, I guess there was a lot of more modern and playful types of hulas that were being shared in the studios in those days. It wasn't called *hālau*, like how it is today.

The community prioritized the need within their community for culturally diverse types of programming, particularly the need of the Hawaiian culture, reviving [it]. We played a very important role in reviving that ancient hula. We held, in conjunction with Wai'anae [Coast Culture and Arts Society], the first workshops in ancient hula using ancient masters to pass on those traditions. In addition, we had workshops in the traditional arts—feather lei making, drum making. Now you see there's a renaissance, and it has survived. But those workshops started off in little communities with traditional people passing on the tradition, knowing that this was the only way that this tradition would continue to survive in a world where survival of a culture was very questionable because of the progress and changes that was taking place.

Well anyway, another thing that happened was that different ethnic groups came to different ethnic presentations. The Portuguese group had come to a hula presentation that I had put [on] for the community, and they had experienced a Filipino cultural music and dance concert that I had organized in the community. They came to me and said, "Can you help us in the Portuguese community?" And they said, "You know, we've seen what you've done, and we would like to have that." The Portuguese, at that time, also—and I'm [part] Portuguese—were having some problems as far as identity and in having young people being proud to be of Portuguese ancestry and to carry on the Portuguese heritage. These people who came to me were apparently very interested and very involved in Portuguese cultural organizations, and so I told them that yeah, I'd do my best to help them.

I discovered at that time---this was in 1987, or was it 1978? Gee, I'm losing track of time. Anyway, the Portuguese would be celebrating their hundredth—their centennial—anniversary of the arrival of the first [Portuguese immigrants to Hawai'i].

JR: Yeah, I think it was in the seventies.

WS: Was it in the seventies? I forgot. I can't remember.

JR: We can check it out. [The centennial was celebrated in 1978.]

WS: Yeah. Well, so what I did was I told them that in order to do this, we would have to bring the whole Portuguese community together. Everyone should be invited to participate in this, everybody should be invited to contribute as to whether they would like to come together first of all. In those days, it was very difficult because some of the organizations were kind of competitive. I represented somebody that had demonstrated the sincerity of not being partial as far as one organization or another, but just trying to help the culture per se. So for one year I met with all these different Portuguese organizations. We discussed where we want to go as a Portuguese community in this state. What can we do in our own ways to contribute towards furthering the culture and heritage—the proud heritage—of our ancestors? And informing them that there would be a hundredth anniversary coming up that would sort of be an opportunity, in our own ways, to contribute. Well, after one year of meeting with these organizational representatives till midnight once or twice a month, I had—after one year they expressed the idea of a unanimous decision that they wanted to form a council on Portuguese heritage.

I had, in the meanwhile, taken them through all the stages of how to develop bylaws. First of all, listing what they wanted to do and incorporating them as goals and objectives, and formulating events that each could contribute and what it would cost to put on these events. And subsequently, after one year, the decision was made—yes, we wanted all to contribute and be a part of it. We organized the State Council on Portuguese Heritage, and I was able to work with the group, got 'em designated as a non-profit state and federal 501-C3 cultural and educational organization.

We had fundraising events. The first fundraiser was all of us contributing our own—I don't want to say elephant sale or rummage sale. But it was like, if you had things and you had donations—we had like a bazaar. We called it *festa*, where we used the traditional venue for trying to fundraise. The fundraiser was basically all of the members and the organizations contributing whatever they had. We had raised, I think, about \$600 and attracted thousands of people. It was really wonderful. And that was the first money that we had to put on events.

Simultaneously, we initiated applications to the National Endowment for the Arts as well as to the legislature and state resources to fund a centennial project that we had already, in one year, developed a plan for. And we were funded. Once we had established our council, we approached the Portuguese consul here, John

[Henry] Felix. He felt this was now an opportunity for him to utilize the community resources to really put forth a wonderful type of celebration and a wonderful way of perpetuating the Portuguese heritage, which we had planned to do in our own way, and tying it in with the centennial celebration. So he initiated, through the governor and through the legislature, the formation of a commission. And members of the commission were appointed by the governor. I was one of them, as well as other representatives of the organizations that had already formed in the council and other political and business people that made up the commission. We organized the celebration for the centennial, and I helped, as John puts it, coordinate and orchestrate it. He called me an orchestrator. It was an event that brought the Portuguese community together in such a way that we were so proud and we could show others the beauty of what we had.

Portuguese jokes, for some of our young people, became very sensitive, and it didn't contribute to one's self-esteem. Also noted at that time, prior to the celebration, when I was meeting with these people, was that the Portuguese in schools were not doing as well as some of the other ethnic groups. We needed to---we felt that in our way we could sort of, perhaps, encourage more self-esteem and pride in your heritage. And so that's how the commission utilized the council to administer and coordinate the program. That's how the State Council on Portuguese Heritage was founded. All the islands were represented in this, and it's still a very viable and very active organization today, funded through the state foundation, in part, as well as, I think, legislative funding and some federal funding and private funding.

The Samoan community saw what I had done, so they approached me and asked, in the Kalihi Valley area, to help in organizing their group. So subsequently I helped organize the Kalihi Valley Samoan Arts Council, which has as its direction the sharing—they had recently migrated during that time period. There was a lot of, I guess, acculturation type of concerns that the elders had, that the younger people were not carrying on and losing the values and traditions that were very important to Samoan identity and the feeling in your heart as to what Samoan really meant as far as its values and customs. This program was designed to have elders work with young people in this designated housing area and community area to carry on those traditions, while they're very young and also while they're in their teenage (years). With the Western thinking that we have in Hawai'i as far as all that is—there's a lot of diversity and a lot of variety of things that can attract you that isn't necessarily, you know. . . .

JR: More distractions.

WS: Yeah. I don't know if it's distractions, but whatever you call it. There's more (of a) variety of very interesting, I guess, distractions. I hate to use that term.

JR: Yeah, it sounds negative.

WS: It could be attractions.

JR: Yeah. It's just more.



WS: Yeah. Sometimes you can lose your identity. What we wanted to do is make sure that there was an opportunity not to lose it, and that you could still enjoy the variety of attractions and diversions and still retain the beautiful culture and heritage that you have, no matter who you are. And don't forget that. It's a part of you. So that's the Samoan. . . .

*Keiki* hula? I started *keiki* hula because at that time most of the performances that you saw of hula featured older—adults, or teenagers that were closer to adult age. There were very little opportunities and venues for children, with the exception of your family experience and your family luau. Children, I guess, were always perceived as not being serious and didn't appreciate the discipline that was required in the hula. And I felt—and I had seen, I guess, with my family's experience—that children, properly trained, could learn much quicker, and can be in touch with their culture through this learning experience, if encouraged, and would be able to pursue, in a very disciplined way, an interest in their culture and this art form. I felt that the hula was one way that touched many facets of the Hawaiian culture, including the language, the history, the poetry, all the arts. They represented the future for Hawai'i's carrying on in terms of interest in the culture—the survival of the culture. As simple as that.

I decided that because there were no, again, venues to showcase children in a professional setting, giving them a sense of recognition and appreciation as young people, that I wanted to create that opportunity for them. Of course, in the back of my mind always [was the awareness] that these children would be the future. And no matter who they are—Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, whatever—if there was an interest in the performance arts in dance, this was a talent that should be nurtured. If there was an interest in the hula, the child would learn through the hula, experience the values, the sense of what Hawai'i's past is all about, and would be exposed to the language and understanding of the poetry. They would recognize, through the songs that they performed, the subject matter. Via a royal chant, they would learn the background about that royalty and how that royalty contributes to Hawai'i and how that royal person is still being acknowledged.

I chose [to name the *keiki* hula competition after] Queen Lili'uokalani because she was a resident of Kalihi-Pālana. And at that time there wasn't really much to recognize her for all that she did. Another thing that I chose her for was because of her contribution to the arts, in particular the poetry and music of Hawai'i. In order to ensure that we could strive for excellence in perpetuating this art through our children, a competition would serve to stimulate that type of discipline.

I have discovered, again, beyond my expectations, that our young people can in many ways be much more appreciative than some of the top performers that I have seen professionally as dancers. And a child at a young age has—there's something that particularly attracted me about seeing young people dance. Because they haven't been exposed to, perhaps, some of the true sense of—I don't know what that word that I want to say. (Pause) Well, they haven't really hardened with life. They're still very innocent, and whenever there's an expression, there's a genuine expression of interest or curiosity or emotion. And when I saw the joy that came

out of these young people's dancing and the professionalism in which they executed or demonstrated and expressed the dance, the quality—the feeling—was very much a part of what they were expressing. And when you see sincere joy, love, and understanding, in that respect, perhaps, a child will always touch, and perhaps in some cases outshine a performance. They may not be as professional in terms of a long-term mastery of the technique, but I think that in other ways they are able to express things about the hula and about the culture that is very much a part of that art form, and one of those things or qualities that we look for, also, besides the mastery of the technique itself. So that's how that started.

And there's many other things. Where do you want to go now?

JR: Well, I guess I should ask you a little about. . . . Specifically, you mentioned that you weren't the director [of the Kalihi-Pālama Culture and Arts Society] at first. Someone else was the director. Who was that person, just for the record?

WS: Her name was Jean Tsushima.

JR: Okay. You also mentioned that it was a little organization, the Kalihi-Pālama Culture and Arts Society. How many people did you have working?

WS: At that time we had four, and I think one was part-time. And in those days it was really something, because every fiscal year we had to go on unemployment because the money was spent and we didn't get funded. So I know what it's like to be in an organization. We were situated at the old OR&L [O'ahu Railway and Land Company] depot building which, if you don't know the area, would be very difficult to find. I put together a hula resource book. And that little agency---and it is a very difficult place to find if you don't know. That book became internationally, I guess, well received, and we had people from all over the world that came to our community. Because we were so involved in the community, we were easy to find if you asked any member of the community. But if you didn't, you would never find it, because the address was hidden from the main road, and we were up the stairs, and we just had a little office space. And it wasn't in the most, as I said, affluent part of town.

JR: You mentioned Alfred Preis, and you touched on how the SFCA was connected to the culture and arts society, but I wanted to explore that a little more because this is an SFCA project, and I wanted to, maybe, see the SFCA from the outside. What exactly did the SFCA do with the group when you were working with them? Were they a conduit for funds? Did they help you with direction? Did you meet with Alfred Preis and talk about different ideas? What was the working relationship?

WS: Well initially, it was my understanding that we operated under the auspices of Mr. Preis and the state foundation. I think we were also a part of the office at that time. And he organized the group. He organized the Kalihi-Pālama Culture and Arts Society. He served as, I guess, the umbrella with this group of people, in an advisory capacity, a funding capacity, the direction. So there was a very close linkage. We and the state foundation were actually one at that time. However, the

funding came from a different source, perhaps. Rather than the state itself, the Model Cities was the resource of funding. And so it is my understanding that he helped put this agency together.

Eventually, as I said, the agency incorporated and became an independent agency, still continuing the relationship of funding through the State Foundation on Culture and the Arts. Mr. Preis, I believe, served as an ex-officio member of our board and provided that type of linkage for the agency, provided direction and guidance, assisted in terms of programming, developing project procedures like contracting. We learned from the state. We actually utilized the same system and the same methods and the same type of forms that was used by the state foundation. And so we became very familiar with the evolution—as the state foundation evolved, so did the Kalihi-Pālama Culture and the Arts. And there were very few cultural—I think we were the only two cultural organizations at that time, community cultural organizations. I remember the Honolulu Theatre for Youth. There were very few at that time. Civic clubs were being funded. It wasn't like today where you had all this proliferation of many organizations.

And so we always felt, at Kalihi-Pālama Culture and Arts [Society], as if we were related [to the SFCA]. There was never a separation from the state foundation. And yet, there were times when we did think very separate and we did disagree. Primarily because we, as a representative body of the community, had to reflect the interest and the type of direction, also, that our community constituents were dictating for us. So that was a relationship that continued. And through the funding, it continued always to be there.

I think that---strange. Speaking of full circle, Mr. Preis is responsible for development of the arts in this state, the pioneer of this, to where it is today. He conceives the concept of community agencies that would be an extension of the state services—and we almost were like little replicas of the State [Foundation on Culture and the Arts]—training personnel in the way the state implements its services on the state level. We were doing it at a community level. Ultimately, the director of this little organization and this concept, after twenty-five years, becomes a director of the state agency.

So actually, Mr. Preis and the state foundation trained someone like me through this relationship, trained, also, artists in how to further their arts and also to teach their arts. Through the similar type of projects that they created for the state, we created within our community. Many of the artists that we trained in our community have become very renown today. And so I think, for me, I feel that there's a fulfillment of the direction. You cannot just have a person pursue something on a short-term basis.

My philosophy while serving as director of Kalihi-Pālama was to take young people, train them from when they're young, provide as much training as we can, to the point where the individual becomes a professional himself or herself as an artist. That was our philosophy, that was our direction, and it did occur. We have people that have been with the program who are now teaching and recognized as a

very, very knowledgeable teacher. And they are professional. They have their own studios and etcetera. So what we put into practice, ultimately the state foundation really put into practice, too. Because it was through that type of training and that type of experience that I was given the experience. Today that experience has brought me here. (Chuckles) So he did more than just to train artists. He trained professionals in the arts administrative field, too. That's how I got my professional training, by this relationship with the state, by the direction the state took and the direction that we took. So isn't that funny? (Chuckles) I guess it isn't really. I didn't mean funny, but I mean . . .

JR: Yeah.

WS: . . . it's just . . .

JR: It's full circle.

WS: It's full circle.

JR: Yeah, yeah. You had mentioned earlier that you initially tried to expose the residents to classical music and things like this, and you soon learned that you had to provide them with things that they were interested in.

WS: No, I didn't provide the exposure. The agency provided the exposure.

JR: A technicality.

WS: Technicality, yeah.

JR: Again, we're talking about the Kalihi-Pālama in relationship with SFCA. How did their support for you. . . . I guess what I'm driving at is, if you're the State Foundation on Culture and the Arts you can support a lot of different things. Was the support--were they wholeheartedly behind you when you wanted to move, maybe, less from the classical music and Western fine arts to more of the ethnic arts and the Hawaiian arts?

WS: Well, it's not necessarily me moving--again, technicality--it's the community thinking in terms of that direction. And because we were a community-based organization, they were giving us what they felt was an important direction to consider in programming for the community. But I never lost the sight, and our agency never lost the sight, of the importance of exposing and having our people experiencing, again, the fine arts and the different cultures. And so what we did was we organized opportunities for people to have that experience. Instead of logistically having a symphony ensemble or a--what do you call it--chamber music ensemble come into an environment that wasn't conducive to people who didn't understand it or know it attend it, what we had to do was educate our people. And so to educate our people we did take these little ensembles and provided the exposure in certain types of settings. But we found that, in some cases, if you were preparing or planning for a big concert, you wouldn't get that type of response from

that type of a community with that type of background that it had. So we reversed the situation, providing exposures in a graduated way.

We utilized our Artists-in-the-Schools program, which we helped pioneer with the state foundation, in our community to provide our young people with that educational opportunity. I think we were the first in the state, if I'm not mistaken, to develop this Artists-in-the-Schools project. The two schools was—Ka'iulani [Elementary School] was one school, and I forgot what the other school was. Well, there were two schools in our community that served as the first schools for this Artists-in-the-Schools demonstration project, and the monies came through Kalihi-Pālama.

In addition, we felt that it wasn't only having arts coming into our community but our community also should go into other communities and experience art. So we also arranged for a bus type of transportation, and we, as a community, went and got buses and stopped at the different housing areas. We had flyers, and we told people that, "Oh, we're all going to go and see this concert at the [Neal] Blaisdell [Center], and it's a wonderful concert." We tried to provide as much background information. Knowing that we were going as a community, there was a sense of having an outing, having the people that you knew from your community to also relate and experience whatever was presented. So we didn't lose sight of that. I think that what I was just trying to indicate was that initially there was a learning experience of how to develop programming for the community, and the learning experience was done by trial and error or on a trial basis. And from that evolved a program that was complete and balanced accordingly.

JR: Okay. I need to stop for a second.

END OF SIDE TWO

TAPE NO. 20-31-1-91; SIDE ONE

JR: We're running out of time.

WS: Yes.

JR: So I wanted to just briefly ask you some broad questions. Maybe what I was trying to drive at in the last question was the support for Hawaiian arts over the last twenty years, let's say, and the interest in this. Some people say there was a Hawaiian renaissance that occurred in the, maybe, mid seventies, around there. Looking back—you've been intimately involved over that period—what sort of a pattern has there been? Has it been steadily upward? Has it leveled off at any point? Was there a peak back then?

WS: I don't know. I think, from my observation, there was created more opportunities for Hawaiian types of arts. As I said, at Kalihi-Pālama I know we had, with Mr.

Preis, helped to try to revive that traditional hula, the *kahiko* style, and some of the folk—I guess they call them folk arts, that there weren't many people who were practicing or carrying them on. And what I saw was a blossoming and a blooming of people who began to take an interest and have more opportunities to participate and learn. As you create more opportunities and as you provide programming that makes these opportunities available for people who, I guess, felt that they hadn't learned it and they wanted to, there was a—there seemed to be an increased interest, or there was demonstrated an interest in a very broad and large scale, to learn more about this specific culture. I also know that in the other ethnic groups that there is a similar type of resurgence, perhaps not as noticeable as the Hawaiian—what is described as a renaissance. Different ethnic groups also had their own way of carrying on their tradition, too. The generation became more, I guess, aware or interested in learning more. I can't tell you if it's peaked, though.

JR: Where are we now? I mean, what's your sense of things now?

WS: What I see is that this renaissance or this interest has expanded beyond the islands itself. We see an interest in California, I know, and nationally, many states are carrying on Hawaiian or Polynesian types of programming. I just met with someone from San Jose, telling me how, you know, with the National Endowment [for the Arts'] focus on cultural diversity—well, for me, cultural diversity was the focus very long ago, I'm still focusing on it—that there is, also, an interest in Polynesian and Pacific Island cultures and in Hawaiian that is being generated nationally. So I see it as growing beyond our islands, too. That's why I can't say whether it peaked or not, because when you see it being carried on and shared by different peoples, wherever they come from, nationally—I know from east to west you'll find a Hawaiian cultural group, and you'll find a Pacific Island cultural group. Then I think the beauty of your culture and the beauty of Hawai'i is still growing and still blossoming.

JR: My last question.

WS: Sure.

JR: Now you're with the SFCA.

WS: Mm hm.

JR: What's in the future, now that you're behind the—you've come full circle, as we said, and you're in the driver's seat now?

WS: I see the potential for a great future for Hawai'i as we enter this decade of the nineties. We, in Hawai'i, have truly what I consider a treasure of artistic resources. This treasure has never been, I think, really, really exhibited and shared to its fullest. I see some beautiful gems that represent talent in our islands, and I want to share it beyond our island community so that others can appreciate and recognize what we have. I had the vision—and everybody has a vision, and they refer to vision. Well, I have the. . . . What's another word for vision? I'm being

motivated to try to indicate Hawai'i as an arts center in the Pacific. I called it an arts capitol of the Pacific. Perhaps it's too grandiose a perspective, but I don't think that it is an unrealistic perspective based upon what I see, and what I see we have and what we have to share. I'm going to try to tap every little bit of creative resources to take these talents—not only exhibit the talents and give it recognition but take the arts and have the arts nurtured, have the arts perpetuated, and have the arts and culture and history and humanities of our islands one that epitomizes what our society is all about and what we have to offer as an island community and an island state. I'm gonna go for it. With the arts community's support and our people of Hawai'i, I think we'll have something very beautiful that we can all be very proud of and very much contributory to, as far as achieving this goal.

JR: Well, thank you.

WS: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

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

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**An Oral History**

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