The Rev. Robert Nakata has gone through a number of transformations in his career—a college physics instructor, a Methodist minister, a state senator and an executive director for the Kualoa-Heeia Ecumenical Youth Project, helping dropout youths earn their high school diplomas. Through it all, he has been devoted to opposing gentrification in Windward Oahu and to protecting farmlands—a position that aligned him with Kokua Hawaii members and their associates who assisted in anti-eviction fights in Waiahole and Waikane valleys and in the Heeia-Kea area. He has continued to be a staunch ally to the poor and homeless, attending a state Senate Committee on Housing public hearing at the State Capitol on October 30, 2018, to show his support against the eviction of Front Street Apartment tenants on Maui. He was honored by lawmakers in 2018 for his idea of putting $200 million into the Rental Housing Trust Fund called the “Bob Nakata Act.” Nakata was interviewed by Gary T. Kubota at Burger King restaurant in Kaneohe on March 27, 2017.

GK: Good morning, Rev. Nakata. When and where were you born and raised?

RN: I was born in 1941. My parents lived in Niu Valley at the time. But my mother’s roots are in Kahaluu. My father was a pig farmer, but when the war came, he couldn’t do his normal work of picking up slop at nearby locations in the morning because of the blackout and curfew. My uncles had a big patch of leased land in Kahaluu, and my father moved the family to Kahaluu and became a taro and banana farmer.

GK: What school did you go to?

RN: I went to Waiahole School, kindergarten through ninth grade, then Castle High School, graduating in 1959.

GK: You graduated in the year Hawaii had statehood. How was it that day?

RN: I remember the school let us all out of classes, so we got into cars or whatever and
Rev. Robert Nakata Interview

went to town to celebrate. I've always been quiet and not all that social. I was kind of a quiet student, didn't hang out with the Japanese students although I had classes with them. When everybody took off from school, I was kind of left behind, so the Hawaiian kids took me with them. I think we went to Waikiki. . . I've always been closer to Hawaiians than most of the other Japanese.

GK: How did that play out in high school?

RN: I got elected student body officer. But on a social level, I hardly dated and went to socials.

GK: Were you Buddhist?

RN: No, I'm a Christian. That's an interesting thing. We lived right next to a Methodist Church, and most of the Japanese were Christians in the Kahaluu area. I never thought about whether the minister was Okinawan or Japanese. He might have been Okinawan, because most of us were Okinawan in this area.

GK: How did that happen?

RN: The minister loved baseball. He got the Japanese kids involved in baseball and got them in the church. So almost all the Okinawans in the area were Methodists.

GK: Was your father an immigrant or was he son of an immigrant?

RN: He was an immigrant. He immigrated from Okinawa in 1913. He came from Kin Village. That's where that guy Toriyama started the migration of Okinawans to Hawaii. . . I didn't check that much into him, but I know he was a Marxist.

He started elementary school in that village. He must have been very well known, because when I would ask questions about him, people knew him. I had a suspicion that he was a Marxist.

GK: So tell me how did you get involved in the anti-eviction fight involving farmers at Waiahole-Waikane?

RN: My uncle was Sei Serakaku, a Waiahole farmer.

GK: Serakaku seemed to be well respected among farmers?

RN: Yes. By the time I came along, he was already a pillar of the Methodist church. He liked baseball. We lived within 100 yards or so of the church, so we were always the kids—the Japanese Okinawan kids—who were always at the church. My uncle Sei really liked the Old Testament prophets. They were the ones who would tell off the king when the king was not doing what God said they should be doing.
Rev. Robert Nakata Interview

GK: Interesting.

RN: One of the Prophets was this fellow Amos. Amos described himself as a herder of sheep and a trimmer of Sycamore trees. In other words, he was a farmer.

GK: (Laughter)

RN: That's why my uncle really liked him. Amos would go tell off the King and say, “If you don't do what's right, God will take you down.”

GK: I know as the son of a farmer you had quite an education. How did all that begin?

RN: I went to University of Hawaii-Manoa. I was good at mathematics. One of my professors suggested I go into physics. He worked for a time with Werner von Braun in rocket science in New Mexico. I eventually earned a bachelor's and a master's degree in physics. Around that time, I was also active as a Methodist in the student group at the university. The Methodist students hung out at the Wesley Foundation. I became one of the leaders in that group. The Foundation had a director who during the Second World War became a conscientious objector. He was from Southern California and had a strong social conscience. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Foundation brought so called “radicals” to speak to students. That's how I met Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I also met James Farmer, the founder of the Congress on Racial Equality.

GK: Wow. In Hawaii?

RN: Yes, I met them in the Wesley Foundation student center. So whenever one of these well-known guys would come over, the Foundation director would make sure that we went to hear them. . . That's what started pulling me into social activism.

GK: So what happened after you graduated?

RN: When I graduated with my master's degree, one of the other physics students who had gone to teach chemistry at the University of Hawaii-Hilo, suggested I come over to the Big Island. The college at Hilo was a two-year junior college at the time. I went to Hilo and taught for a couple of years. But I actually was interested more in social activism.

GK: What happened?

RN: I applied for seminary, and because of the social justice orientation, I wanted either to attend seminary in the Bay Area around Berkeley or in New York. The Methodist offered me a scholarship to a new seminary in Kansas City, Missouri. But, I told them I'd rather pay my way and go to Union Theological in Manhattan. It had a long-standing reputation of training social activists. That's why I wanted to go there.

GK: That was kind of gutsy of you.
RN: I thought I was saying goodbye to the scholarship. But they gave me the scholarship anyway, and I attended Union Theological.

GK: So what happened after that?

RN: When I was done with studies at Union Theological, I went to Syracuse in northern New York to teach in a state-run prep school for mainly African Americans and Puerto Ricans. They were people who had been discouraged from going to college, because they were a minority. So I did that for a couple of years.

Then Randy Kalahiki started the Kualoa-Heeia Ecumenical Youth (KEY) Project. The project took high school dropouts off the streets and provided a way to earn a high school equivalent degree—GED. I wrote to the KEY Project, and I said I’d like to come and work there. The KEY Project didn’t have an opening. So I just came back and went back to my old church with my uncle.

GK: Did you gain employment at the church?

RN: It was a mixture of both. The Honolulu Council of Churches was just starting an internship at the Legislature. I applied for it and got it. I returned to Hawaii in 1972. My work at the Legislature for them was with state Sen. John Ushijima. He was working on making reforms in the state prison system. It didn’t turn out well, but he had me watching prison-related legislation for him. Out of that came the Oahu Community Correction Center. At that time, it was a step forward.

GK: Then what happened?

RN: The KEY Project got a Vista grant and a position opened for me. Several Hawaiian ohanas including Randy Kalahiki’s family had started community organizing work in the area several years before to look at a proposed flood control project. I received less than $200 a month and was married and had a daughter.

GK: Hmm.

RN: I was always a strong church member. The church got me in with the Okinawan side of the community, and the Vista stuff got me in with the Hawaiian side. So, I was serving as a bridge between the two. Randy Kalahiki was smart. He knew my mother’s family was related to Sei, one of the leaders of the Okinawan side of the community. So, that’s why he grabbed me immediately. He knew that he had to work with the two.

GK: He was very inclusive.

RN: Yes, he was. Kalahiki and other leaders made sure the Waiahole-Waikane eviction fight was inclusive. It never became just a Hawaiian movement. There was that element
from Ethnic Studies—Pete Thompson, Kehau Lee, and Terrilee Kekoolani. The three of them were dedicated heart and soul. They were there almost a whole day every day.

GK: I know the three, along with Kokua Hawaii members Soli Niheu and Joy Ahn, held leftist beliefs. How did community leaders deal with that?

RN: It’s really interesting. The leftist indoctrination might have worked with the Filipinos and Hawaiians. But Okinawans are much more conservative than the Hawaiians or the Filipinos. Because of my uncle Sei, the Okinawan part of the community stayed with it. He had a strong social justice orientation. I gathered some respect because I was viewed in the Okinawa-Japanese community as the star student. Uncle Sei had a very practical approach to those helping Waiahole-Waikane. As my uncle put it, “Well, if the Marxists are coming, and they’re the only guys that are going to come help us, we’re going to work with them.” He was very practical.

GK: How would you describe the Okinawan-Japanese community in Kahaluu?

RN: The ones in Kahaluu retained their agricultural roots. They didn’t get into the business world that much. I think that’s a key difference.

GK: Did you ever get into a discussion with Soli or Joy about ideology?

RN: No. I think I was basically still socially conservative. . . I told them, “Look. I’m too steeped in Christianity to go that far.” I agreed with them philosophically.

GK: You agreed with the value system?

RN: Yes.

GK: What parts of the value system?

RN: I’m very deep into this Christianity. I saw Jesus as a real revolutionary, and his immediate core of followers as his disciples. Out of them came the whole idea of “from each according to ability to each according to needs.” (Karl Marx in the “Critique of the Gotha Program,” also in the Bible, Acts 4:32–35: 32) That’s where it came from and that’s what they did.

GK: Who were the other leaders?

RN: The most central figure was Bobby Fernandez. He’s about eight or 10 years younger than I am, but just a natural leader. Among the Filipinos, the leader was Hannah Salas. She was very sharp. I ended up describing her as best grassroots organizer I know. She was a strong Catholic, so that kept her from going overboard. Sorry to put it that way. Her good buddy was Patricia Royos.
Rev. Robert Nakata Interview

GK: Besides Waiahole-Waikane residents and other activists, including Kokua Hawaii blocking Kamehameha Highway to stop the eviction, who else was involved?

RN: I was very active, especially among the Methodist ministers. As we were planning these things, I was going around to Methodists to have them sign a pledge.

GK: What was that pledge?

RN: If it came to eviction, they would come and join us.

GK: Did it work?

RN: There were about 15 of them.

GK: Fifteen ministers who signed the pledge?

RN: Yeah, including the top Methodists.

GK: Did it ever come to that?

RN: We sounded the alarm and people came. It was right around New Year's time. Through information we obtained through the courts, we knew about when the eviction might happen. So, around that New Year's weekend, we invited people to come and camp out in the valleys with us.

GK: How many came?

RN: There were about 500 people camped out in the Waihole-Waikane valleys with us.

GK: What happened?

RN: The sheriff's representative serving the eviction notice was careful when he came. He said, “I'm only delivering the writs, I'm not the guy that's going to evict you guys, so I will call you guys before I come. . . ”

GK: What happened to the writs?

RN: Our plan was for people to take the writs, crush them and throw them on the road, and then burn them. We did that. The media was there and everything.

GK: So it looked like it could happen anytime?

RN: That night on January 4, 1977 (Hon. Advertiser January 5, 1977, Front Page), after receiving the writs, I think we had the CB radio operators and their associates keeping an eye on the police stations. The plan was when the word came that the police and sheriff
deputies were coming, the alarm would be sounded, and that’s exactly how it played out. The CB guys called us and said, “Hey, there’s a lot of activity around the police station.” We told them, “Watch for a little while more, and if they are coming, then let us know and we’ll sound the alarm.”

We were having a steering committee meeting in the garage at Bobby Fernandez’s house. So they said, “Hey, they’re coming.” Everybody jumped in their cars, went down Waiahole Valley Road and most of them went to the Kaneohe side of Kamehameha Highway because we figured that’s where the police and deputies were going to come from. (The major regional police station was located in Kaneohe.)

I figured hey, we’ve got to have some people on the Kahuku side. I turned that way and here’s this one guy, Hannah’s husband, with his pickup truck blocking one lane, so I pull up with my Volkswagen square back and I pull up and I block the other lane, and a few more people came, but basically we were the blocking force. The other side had all kinds of people.

GK: I guess it was hard for even the police to get there?

RN: Yeah. Traffic was blocked up. It happened close to 11 p.m. There was more action on the Kaneohe side. . . What I heard is the top cop spent a couple of hours trying to tell Waiahole-Waikane residents and supporters, “No, we’re not coming, we’re not.” We held the blockade for a couple of hours. When no police or deputies came in force, we opened the road.

GK: What was the reaction?

RN: You would think that the drivers would be mad, even on our side there was only several of us there. The drivers were not mad, they were kind of cheering us on. Finally when our guys said, “Okay, we’ll lift the blockade after a couple of hours.” The police really didn’t come.

On the Kaneohe side at the intersection near the poi factory, we had maybe a couple of hundred people lining the highway with arms raised and cheering. The drivers were tooting their horns.

GK: That’s a demonstration.

RN: Yes, it really was.

GK: What was the impact?

RN: It was a good false alarm. It demonstrated the broad support for the Waiahole-Waikane residents. I think the CB observers saw police changing of the shift in Kaneohe
and thought the police were going to Waiahole. After the blockade, our supporters were starting to leave. They had jobs.

GK: I know the Honolulu Advertiser had it as its lead story on the front page. I guess it had a lot of news coverage?

RN: Oh yeah. Waiahole resident Calvin Hoe was with his wife who was visiting Minnesota for the holidays. He saw it on the news there.

GK: So, where did this all lead?

RN: Windward Oahu community leaders Randy Kalahiki and Buddy Ako met with Gov. George Ariyoshi in his office. They told him he better do something or it could get really serious. Ariyoshi had said he can’t do anything. But a couple of weeks later he said the state was going to buy Waiahole Valley.