

KOKUA HAWAII ORAL HISTORY PROJECT INTERVIEW WITH
Robert Fernandez



Robert Fernandez
Photo by Ed Greevy

Robert “Bobby” Fernandez was the president of the Waiahole-Waikane Community Association during a period when hundreds of farmers and residents were threatened with eviction and alliances were formed with various communities and groups, including Kokua Hawaii members to stop the eviction in the mid-to-late 1970s. Gov. George Ariyoshi eventually stepped in to successfully purchase 600 acres of land in Waiahole Valley to keep it as farmland in perpetuity. Fernandez, who still lives in Waiahole Valley, was interviewed by Gary T. Kubota on April 11, 2017, at Burger King in Kaneohe.

GK: Good morning, Bobby. When were you born and where did you grow up?

RF: I was born in 1946. I grew up in Waiahole Valley.

GK: Who were your parents?

RF: My dad was Sylvester Sonny Fernandez, and my mother was Eleanor Hoke Fernandez. I’m the youngest of five, and I’m nine years away from my youngest sister. So, I was a surprise package.

GK: And what did your dad do?

RF: My father used to work for Hawaiian Electrical Products. He was a sales person, and my mom worked for Honolulu Electric as a clerk.

GK: How did they get to live in Waiahole?

RF: My father was part of a family that was left land by his mother and he was the only one that homesteaded it and kept up with paying the taxes and eventually accumulated the property from the rest of the siblings. So that was our home.

GK: How far back did the land ownership go with your family?

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RF: I'm not sure, probably early 1900s or something like that. I'm not exactly sure when they acquired the property. But I guess my great-grandfather ran cattle in Waiahole. I don't think they got it through the Great Mahele or anything like that. I'm pretty sure they bought the property from somebody. The land was a part of the bigger family parcel so we still have cousins who own their property in Waiahole.

GK: So, when the eviction notices came for the farmers, you owned the property. What was the situation?

RF: Yes. We supported the farmers and residents who didn't own the land. We also had plans in case evictions did take place, where families could actually camp on our property at that time, because the majority of the land was owned by the daughter of Lincoln McCandless, Elizabeth Marks, and the majority of the people were McCandless tenants and faced eviction.

GK: What made you side with the farmers and residents facing eviction?

RF: I was born and raised as a young boy running around, was treated so well by everybody that lived there, so, they, all my neighbors, had a special meaning to me.

GK: How did your involvement in the eviction fight evolve?

RF: About two years, maybe a year and a half before the eviction notices, I guess, to kind of put everything together and find out who knows what, we all got the neighbors together and had a meeting at the Waiahole Elementary School cafeteria. Through that, I guess is how we first started to actually find out what rumors were true and which weren't. As I recall, that's how the Waiahole-Waikane Association evolved. That was the start of it.

GK: Were you working with anyone?

RF: One thing I really need to mention is that I was involved with the KEY Project in Kahaluu, and I became a good friend with Bob Nakata. He called to my attention the possible residential development that was going to change the land use in Waiahole. So, that kind of really started off the ball rolling too.

GK: Could you describe Waiahole and the farmers?

RF: We had several farmers. One of the farmers that farmed up the road—his operation was mostly flowers and ti leaves, then we had the Tshako family who raised taro and sweet potatoes. We had the Matayoshis and the Teruyas who are Okinawan farmers. Next to the main highway, there were several taro patches, irrigated taro patches that used the ancient Hawaiian auwai systems. The taro was farmed by the Kaya family. There was a lot of farming in Waiahole. I mean there were several other farmers involved, exact number I can't tell you right now, but I could with a little bit more research or remembering.

GK: So there was a mixture of ethnicities in Waiahole?

RF: There was a big mixture. I think we took a survey and I can say that I think maybe 46 percent was Hawaiian and part Hawaiian, of the people that lived in the valley. You've got to remember that we had all different ethnicities—a lot of Okinawan farmers and they were in the community a long, long time. So the farming community kind of evolved. I remember my dad saying that before my time, they grew taro and they even grew rice and also pineapple within the valley. Times change.

GK: Can you describe the situation facing Windward Oahu residents?

RF: Everybody was afraid. There was a general plan that would turn the Windward side into the second city. Plans were already drawn up. Part of the plan was to make a power plant in Heeia-Kea. There was going to be a power plant, and there was a move to get the people that resided there evicted. A deep draft harbor would be built in Kaneohe Bay. They were going to dredge it all up. Along with that came housing development. All the land that the large private land owners were sitting on for years would become valuable. The next step for the landowners was to get the Land Use Commission to change the zoning from agriculture to urban.

GK: Can you describe how people felt about the plan to change the valley to residential development and their thoughts on it?

RF: The greatest fear of the majority of the community was that they were going to get evicted. When we started, some felt like, there's no way we can fight these guys because they own the land and they can do whatever they want with the land 'cuz it's theirs. Some members of the community had been evicted before. They relocated to Waiahole. One particular guy, Edward Spencer, said, "I'm not going to move any more," and he pretty much put his money where his mouth was and he donated \$1,000 to the association when we first started so. . . .

GK: Wow.

RF: He's not going to move any more. He was in Kalama Valley, got kicked out. He was in Kalihi Valley and got kicked out. So now he's in Waiahole, and he's not going to get kicked out anymore. . . . He's a really, really tough old man. He grew mostly ti leaves. The family is still there and retained their place. You had all the fears of eviction but with all the support we started gaining, people started changing their minds. The community really gained support from a lot of people who said they were going to fight it to the end, and they did, supporting the fight against the eviction.

GK: Kokua Hawaii organizers along with the Ethnic Studies group were providing support at that time?

RF: Yes, Kokua Hawaii members were a great influence. They came down to support us. I

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really especially liked Soli Niheu. Soli and Joy Ahn were there for the same reason—and that was to support us. They provided a lot of help to us. Also, their friend Pete Thompson, and all the people from the University of Hawaii's Ethnic Studies group. They taught us a lot. They actually came down and stayed in the valley. Of course, I was skeptical in the beginning. We're more conservative. But, they taught us a lot about how to stand strong and how to protest. They were aces in that area, and we learned a lot from them. I think, it really paid off.

GK: Did you ever get to meet presidents of the other community associations who had faced or were facing evictions?

RF: A lot of community groups rallied, and we all got together. There were a lot of different groups. We talked with Pete Tagalog of Ota Camp in Waipahu. There was Ricky and Jerry Kaluiwa involved in Heeia-Kea. I kind of admired Randy Kalahiki and my Auntie Jackie Chong who helped youths at the KEY Canteen. When I became involved in Waiahole, Randy came over and talked with me and supported us. Also Creighton and Kathy Matoon from Punaluu were great allies.

GK: How did that feel?

RF: Well we could use all the support we could get. Although I was skeptical about each group that came to help us as to what was the reasoning behind it. But you know, we wanted support from all different aspects of the community.

I mean I can speak like that now, but back then, I was like, my foot was in my mouth all the time, because I couldn't speak and I couldn't think because I had never ever gone through college or anything, never been a part of a protest. We were super green and super scared of everything. You know, I guess local style, you just lay back. You know what I mean? You don't push your luck. That's the way you know we're taught.

GK: Can you describe what led to Waiahole-Waikane residents and supporters to block Kamehameha Highway, the main highway along the Windward Oahu coastal corridor?

RF: Okay. We had received information authorities were drawing up the papers to evict the people from the valleys, because the people had stopped paying rent to the landlord. The money was all put into the bank, into an escrow account, or a joint fund. This was only after the rents were raised anywhere from a hundred percent to three hundred percent. That's when people really put their foot down and decided to do that. We got word that the sheriffs were going to come to serve eviction notices to the people and to have them evicted. A lot of people, at this time, rallied. Supporters actually occupied the valley. There were a lot of supporters camping out.

GK: What was the plan?

RF: Kokua Hawaii and other outside groups had supporters who were on notice. We had

this planned, that if, in fact, they were going to come and evict us, we and supporters were going to block Kam Highway. We formulated a plan to block Kam Highway, on both sides, on the north end and on the south end of the valley. We had people watching the police and listening on the police frequencies. One of our supporters called, and said, "Hey, they're coming." So, we said, "Okay. We formulated the plan. Let's implement it." So we did. We sent, I think about, seven cars on the north end of Kam Highway. Right by the Waikane Bridge, on the other side, on the Kaneohe end. People just parked their cars and trucks and stuff. Of course, they locked them up, and they completely blocked the road, on both ends. On the Kaneohe side, we stood on a private driveway. There was Mike Hare, who was our attorney representative, myself, Bernie Lam Ho, owner of the property we stood on, and other members of the Waiahole Association.

We just stood there and waited for the cops to come. When they came, the cops were angry. I mean, this one policeman, I remember him distinctly. He was like, "What the--- are you guys doing? Who the ---- do you think you guys are? What the ---- you want me to do? Call the mayor?"

I looked at him, and I said, "Yeah. Call the mayor (Fasi)."

And, he looked at me. He was like, "You got to be kidding me!"

"No. We're not moving nothing till the mayor talks to us."

GK: What happened?

RF: I don't know. When push came to shove, nobody got arrested. Maybe somebody called the mayor? They assured us that there was no eviction going to be taking place that night, or anytime in the future. With that, we cleared the highway. Then, we rallied by the poi factory. Of course, people must have been angry, because it was blocked for one hour, from going, traveling home.

We all stood along the highway, in front of the Waiahole Poi Factory, holding support Waiahole-Waikane signs, thinking people would be angry at us. But the people were going by blasting their horns and tooting at us. It was like, all elated, "Hey, these guys not angry with us. They supporting us!"

GK: Wow.

RF: If it wasn't for the assistance, I mean outside people who came in with knowledge about how to deal with this politically, without being so conservative, as we were, I don't think the eviction fight would have been successful. I mean we learned a lot. I was never involved in a picket line in my life. The way it was portrayed to us, they reasoned with us that we did have rights to do this. It could never be fought with money or legal rights. But, it could be fought politically. That's what we all centered on. It took a long time, but we learned.

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GK: What did you learn?

RF: We planned every demonstration we had to try to foresee things so that, “If a guy gets out of hand while demonstrating, what are we going to do?”

We didn’t want anybody to get arrested, so we had our own marshals within our picket line. If somebody got out of hand or overly emotional, we would grab them, and we would take care of them. It was really good. Nobody in the valley would think about this stuff, but I think the outside supporters like Kokua Hawaii did. Throughout all of our demonstrations, no one got arrested.

GK: That was part of the training in Kokua Hawaii, so that there wouldn’t be any violence.

RF: Yeah. That’s the major thing that we stressed. I mean, I even had the vice squad, I mean the police, come and talk to me, try to pick my brain to find out what’s coming up. Of course, I never give them anything. I just listened to them.

GK: Did you ever go up to the state Capitol in Honolulu to demonstrate?

RF: Oh yes. We went to the Capitol several times and to Elizabeth Marks’ residence too. We walked right on her property, right through her driveway. Then, we came outside, and we just picketed.

GK: How’d that go?

RF: Her neighbors loaned us their rubbish can lids. You know, those days, the rubbish cans were all metal. They’d go, “Hey, yeah. Take that and bang on this!” I guess some of them didn’t care for her, either. Anyway, we had a lot of support. We went to schools, and talked to students about the struggle. We talked to several groups and held several press conferences and interviews.

GK: Yeah. So how did the residents react to threats of eviction?

RF: When push did come to shove, actually some of them did leave. We tried to talk them out of it. I remember this one incident where a family actually had all their possessions packed and loaded in the back of truck. When somebody told us about this family moving out, I took off down there to talk to them.

GK: What did you tell family members?

RF: I told them if push comes to shove and we do get evicted, we’ll help you move that stuff but please stay now. Until today, they’re still there.

GK: Great!

RF: That was a victory. Of course, you couldn't reason with some people. They were afraid, understandably, so they moved out.

GK: What did you do?

RF: One of the things that we did was, when the people moved out, we tried to fill those houses. There were only a couple of these instances. And guess what? Those people who moved in got the lease after the eviction struggle.

GK: And how do you feel now?

RF: The trend still continues.

GK: Yeah?

RF: Because you're still dealing with the state. The state doesn't know how to deal with the tenants. If you know the way government is run in Hawaii, we're not at the top of everybody's list so it's still a battle. Although people do have long-term leases, which is a plus. Thank God the state did accumulate 600 acres so people are still farming and still living in their places. Of course, most of the old timers, they're all gone now. Their relatives remain to practice and maintain their lifestyle.

