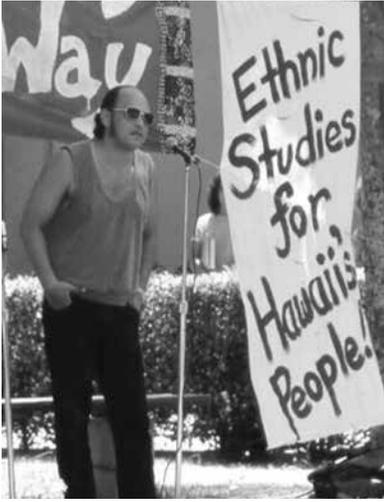


KOKUA HAWAII ORAL HISTORY PROJECT INTERVIEW WITH
Raymond Ako



*Raymond "Buddy" Ako
Photo courtesy of the James Young family*

Raymond "Buddy" Ako, an associate of Kokua Hawaii, served as the director of the Hauula Youth Center and also as an organizer joining coalitions to advance the causes of minorities. He was a member of negotiating groups to save the University of Hawaii-Manoa Ethnic Studies Program in 1972 and to help stop the eviction of Waiahole-Waikane residents in the late 1970s. Ako was interviewed on February 23, 2017, at Burger King in Kaneohe.

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

BA: I was born in 1938 and was raised on Waikalua Road in Kaneohe. My dad James worked as a civilian supply clerk at the Marine Base when it was a naval air station. My mom, Lei, was a house wife.

GK: How did you end up living in Hauula?

BA: My mother and father divorced when I was born, actually. So my mother got custody of me, remarried, and they moved to Hauula.

GK: Where'd you go to high school?

BA: I went to Kahuku High School.

GK: Can you describe the area?

BA: There was a lot of sugarcane. Kahuku was a sugar plantation town. Kahuku was the place that you went to have fun. There was a theater, restaurants, high school, hospital and the sugar mill operated by Alexander & Baldwin on land leased from Campbell Estate.

GK: After you graduated from high school, what happened?

BA: I joined the Air Force. That was in 1956. I served four years in the Air Force and got out in 1960. I went to work for the Air National Guard as a personnel clerk for a few years

before I became a policeman in 1963 for several years, then I worked for a household moving company and attended a church college at Laie.

GK: How did you get involved in community organizing?

BA: In 1969, I began hanging around with Mervyn Chang in Hauula. He lived at Pokiawai Place. There was Mackey Catania and Ko Hayashi. Kokua Hawaii's printing press was located at Mervyn's place. There was another guy. . . Park?

GK: Linton Park

BA: Linton Park. Yeah, Linton Park, it was enjoyable sitting with him.

GK: What happened?

BA: You sit around all day with them and then, I slowly began to listen to their stories and, um, began to get a different outlook on life, more so a different outlook on what happened to Hawaiians. So much wrong was done to us historically that we never talked about.

GK: How did it make you feel?

BA: I began to see the light. It made me ask a lot of questions like why did it take me till I was about 28, 29 years old, why did it take me that long to understand the true history of what happened to us Hawaiians. . . I was growing up to be super American, a patriotic American. It really turned over my entire outlook on life. I regretted that I arrested Hawaiians. I went through that whole regretful part of my life. But it is what it is. That was the beginning of my so-called, "being radicalized."

GK: What was the image you had of yourself and other Hawaiians?

BA: The image I had and many people had of Hawaiians was that they were dumb, stupid and lazy. That's it. I was from a very poor family on Waikalua Road. We still had our house when I was growing up, but it was broken down.

GK: Did you speak Hawaiian?

BA: We spoke no Hawaiian at all, just bits and pieces. My Chinese grandfather raised me up after my parents divorced. My grandaunts and granduncles spoke Hawaiian among themselves but not within our household.

GK: Why?

BA: I don't know. When you're a kid, you don't question those things. I was just intent on learning English and going through the standard educational process.

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GK: How did that leave you feeling?

BA: I didn't want to be Hawaiian. I wanted to be American—study hard, learn about George Washington chopping down that cherry tree. You know what I'm saying here?

GK: Yeah.

BA: Then I went further to get Americanized when I joined the military, and you double that patriotism by being a cop.

GK: So how did you reconcile that?

BA: It was really hard, facing friends with my new ideas about Hawaiian rights and taking back the land. My mother used to tease me when she saw me, "Got any new land for us today, son?"

GK: (Laughs)

BA: I got terribly ostracized when I went to the dark side (laughs), so to speak. But I felt we're not gonna win everything but we're gonna try to win something.

GK: So what did you do?

BA: I reconciled my past by being Hawaiian all over again, and helping where I could.

GK: So what did you do?

BA: Eventually, I heard about how a youth development program in Hauula was looking for help. It was run by HCAP, Honolulu Community Action Program. So, anyway, I got involved in that, and through that effort I met Pae Galdeira who had a youth program in Waimanalo and Randy Kalahiki with his youth program in Kahaluu. We created this Waimanalo, Kahaluu, Hauula network of youth clubs.

GK: Describe to me the youths in Hauula?

BA: The youths in our Hauula had this stigma, very, very negative reputation about being bad guys, tough guys. But through the community action program and OEO, Office of Economic Opportunity, we are able to get funding to create these programs for at-risk kids, including the dropout kids. We tried to help the kids get their GED or something like that.

GK: How did you do that?

BA: We organized these kids into a recreational activity—a pool table and ukulele playing, then broadened our efforts taking into account all of the elements that go into making

them a better person—educational classes, such as how to be interviewed for a job. You teach them what is right and wrong.

GK: Hmm. Not easy. Did you use your experience as a former police officer?

BA: Yeah. I used to tell them, “Listen, you guys wanna know how to steal? I’ll teach you how because I used to be a cop. I’ll teach how.” So, I just throw it back at them. I’d tell them, “Don’t be foolish.” I had Randy and Pae Galdeira supporting me in this whole effort.

GK: When did you get involved in community activism?

BA: I think my first protest was in Hauula when the laborer’s union was going to put a housing project here in 1969. This is land the laborer’s union owned. Many in the community, including myself, felt it should go first to Hauula residents who were members of the laborer’s union, rather than opening it up to the entire union.

GK: Yes. What happened?

BA: It never got built. They couldn’t get the proper zoning. There were repercussions. Later on, when I was unemployed, I went to the laborer’s union and tried to sign up, but a union man said, “Ako, no, you cannot join this union.”

GK: How did this make you feel?

BA: I knew there would be backlash to all of that. I could live with that. But I could not live without being me.

GK: What happened as far as jobs?

BA: Randy, Pae and I were slowly building our network of community action. Pretty soon, I got hired as the Windward district manager for HCAP for six years starting 1973.

GK: What was your next protest?

BA: It involved saving the Ethnic Studies Program at the University of Hawaii-Manoa in 1972.

GK: Why?

BA: I was completely turned off against that whole university structure—the ivory tower. But I saw a need for more Hawaiians to be involved in it. Somebody contacted me.

GK: I did, after talking with Kokua Hawaii leaders Soli Niheu and Joy Ahn. I called Randy Kalahiki and Ota Camp Makibaka Association President Pete Tagolog to help us as well. We relied upon people in Ethnic Studies to provide research to help us fight

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the evictions and provide education about ethnic history. There was a quantum shift in the protest movement on campus in 1972 because community leaders were present and participating for the first time in a UH sit-in. You were then the director of the Hauula Youth Center?

BA: Yes, the sit-in needed to happen. Anyway, I took my kids, and I told them, we're gonna go up there to learn something. We're gonna take it to a different level, I told them. Let's go up, just observe, and see if we can help in any way. I said, mostly they want the bodies. We'll like at least wake them up and say, "Wow yeah, they got a lot of guys up here."

GK: There were more than 300 that I counted and the numbers were still growing. Well, I guess you looked, then took action to save Ethnic Studies, 'cause you were on the negotiating table. (Chuckles) I remember the Ota Camp Association brought food to support the protest. I guess you also had a hand in helping to feed the protesters and their supporters.

BA: We had support from all over. University of Hawaii anthropologist Tom Gladwin provided the money to feed everybody in Bachman Hall, at least to make stew and rice or chili and rice and sandwiches.

GK: Yeah.

BA: If you don't provide food, you can't keep the crowd; they're going home.

GK: We not only kept the crowd. It began growing, especially around dinner time. (Laughter)

BA: Yeah. Then after the negotiations during the sit-in, I became the chairman of the People's Advisory Committee appointed to determine the future of Ethnic Studies. It did produce some positive educational results.

GK: I remember besides Randy and you, Paige Barber of group called "The Hawaiians" was also at the sit-in representing her group.

BA: Yes, Barber was part of that. She was part of a group of moderate Hawaiians—Winona Rubin, Gard Kealoha, and Pae Galdeira and other active Hawaiians at that time. Eventually, we controlled the board at Honolulu Community Action Program (HCAP) to create programs.

GK: The Hawaiians organization also had some success at increasing the number of houses built on Hawaiian Homesteads?

BA: Yes, the Hawaiians organization went after the Hawaiian Homestead issue too. The state was building only about 35 homes a year, and The Hawaiians wanted more to be

built. So we began to organize all the Hawaiian homesteads on all islands. Eventually, 3,000 to 5,000 people marched to the Capitol. . . . Anyway, Ariyoshi eventually appointed Georgiana Padeken and Winona Rubin to the Hawaiian Homes Commission. The next year, the number of homes went from 35 homes to about 295 homes.

GK: You were also involved in protesting the planned eviction of people at Waiahole-Waikane?

BA: I did. There's a picture of me with a little boy on my shoulder. . . . (laughter) blocking the road to Waiahole-Waikane. Anyway, we got asked to participate in that.

GK: How did you feel about supporting Waiahole-Waikane tenants?

BA: In the beginning, Randy, Pae and I were very, very reluctant because of the radical elements involved in the protest. There was talk of physical confrontation, and we didn't want that. We thought negotiation was the better thing. Bobby Fernandez and Sei Serakaku were the community leaders. The Hawaiians organization advised us, "Stay out of there. We got our own fight." The residents asked us to intervene because they knew we knew Gov. George Ariyoshi and he was very, very supportive of all our Hawaiian activities.

GK: Who knew Gov. Ariyoshi?

BA: Pae Galdeira and Randy Kalahiki.

GK: So, they supported Gov. George Ariyoshi during the elections?

BA: They supported George all the way. So, George was willing to talk to us. We had visited him previously about Hawaiian Homestead issues. When Gov. Burns died in office, Ariyoshi took over and he was more favorable.

GK: What was the situation back then?

BA: The landowner, Elizabeth McCandless, refused to meet with Waiahole-Waikane leaders Bobby Fernandez and Sei Serakaku.

GK: My understanding is that this happened a couple of weeks after hundreds of Waiahole-Waikane residents and their supporters blocked Kamehameha Highway leading into the valley for a couple of hours. What happened?

BA: So, somebody got a hold of Randy. We went to our Hawaiians organization. Again, Gary, nobody wanted to get involved. It's too radical for us. But we had a very nice meeting up in the valley. The Rev. Bob Nakata mediated that meeting, and the residents agreed to let the Hawaiians such as us meet with the governor. And we met with the governor and Mrs. McCandless.

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GK: How did it go?

BA: We had a long session there. We had our own strategy. The only thing we wanted to do was to lift the evictions, and go back to the table, which she had refused to do. And the eviction notices were already served and had been burned by the residents. The ones at the meeting were Pae, Randy, Gard Kealoha, Winona Rubin, and me. There was also attorney Alan Kay, who represented Elizabeth Marks, and later became a federal judge. He was fairminded and compassionate. He's retired now. He set up a meeting with Mrs. McCandless at the governor's place. And we went there, and we talked it over.

She was very bitter. . . . The talks went back and forth. Our strategy was to get her to lift the eviction. We asked for 90 days, thinking 30 days was what we wanted. She was eventually willing to lift the eviction for 30 days.

GK: What happened after that?

BA: After this meeting, Ariyoshi created this blue-ribbon committee and said he'd meet with us after talking with the committee. He never told us who he was going to meet with. He preferred to keep that to himself.

GK: Then what happened?

BA: Ariyoshi decided he was gonna buy whole valley. He found the money to do it. So, Ariyoshi settled it. But I like to think we had a hand in that. We negotiated the lifting of the evictions that gave Ariyoshi the time to figure something out—which he did.

GK: Randy Kalahiki was also involved in helping to provide legal rights for Native Hawaiians. How did that come about?

BA: A lot of Hawaiian problems required some kind of legal solution—fighting evictions, fighting against quiet title actions to take Hawaiian ancestral lands. There were no resources to carry the legal fight.

For a time, the Legal Aid Society of Hawaii became a way to do it. Through HCAP, through our district councils, we were allowed to elect representatives to the Legal Aid board. And that's how we started. Pretty soon, all the island's community action programs began to get board members elected. And eventually, we got enough of the votes to kind of take over that whole board. And so, Pae Galdeira became the chairman of the Legal Aid Society of Hawaii. Johnny Waihee (former governor of Hawaii) was one of the attorneys. Mel Masuda was one of the attorneys.

Then, Nixon got elected president. He cut off a lot of the HCAP money. He cut off a lot of the OEO money. Because you know, Gary, politically we were organizing the poor people and their strength in numbers began to increase, and the ones in power nationally and statewide. Welfare rights was our number one priority. Hawaiian rights was our priority.

State legislators balked when they saw native rights, including land and water rights. They wanted to see Legal Aid involved in eviction, divorce, and abuse cases—that kind of stuff. They didn't want Legal Aid to get involved in the political arena. So slowly our money began to dry up.

GK: So what did the Randy and others do?

BA: Gail Prejean, Randy Kalahiki, we started the effort to create our own nonprofit legal corporation. That's how the Native Hawaiian Legal Corporation was founded. We got Native American help. John Echohawk was in charge of the Native American Rights Fund. John came down here. We met with him. He gave us the starter money. He went to all the major foundations, Kellogg, all the big guys to get money. We started by getting grants for the Native Hawaiian Legal Corporation.

GK: What do you think of the Native Hawaiian Legal Corporation today?

BA: Look at it today. It's a separate. It's a pretty powerful legal arm for the Hawaiians.

GK: How do you feel about all of the changes that came about during the start of the Hawaiian Renaissance?

BA: If they want to label it the "Hawaiian Renaissance," that's fine. The way I looked at it is we tried to address the problems facing Hawaiians and other people and contribute to solving them, and things began turning around.

