

KOKUA HAWAII ORAL HISTORY PROJECT INTERVIEW WITH
Gwen Kim



Gwen Kim
Photo courtesy of Gary Kubota

For several years in the 1970s, Gwen Kim was a member of Kokua Hawaii, helping with research and outreach to a number of communities fighting evictions. Together with her late husband Henry “Soli” Niheu, Kim’s home became the center for dozens of Kokua Hawaii meetings, and she advised and helped to develop a core of Kokua Hawaii community organizers who played significant roles in providing a voice for poor working-class communities. Recently retired as a social work administrator with Queen Liliuokalani Children’s Center, she has been called the mother of Onipaa Na Hui Kalo. Her arrest protesting military expansion was captured in the award-winning film by Keala Kelly, Noho Hewa. The interview was conducted in Honolulu on March 29, 2016, and October 5, 2016.

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

GWEN: I was born in 1943 in Honolulu. But I was raised as a young child in Windward Oahu. My paternal grandparents were farmers and when they died, being the oldest, my father, who was Korean, inherited and took over the farm. I remember my sister and I playing as kids in the taro patches and pulling each other on the harvesting sled. . . I absolutely loved being close to the land.

On my mother’s side of the family, my grandfather was Rev. Choon Ho Lim, and he was sent to Hawaii by the Methodist ministry in Korea on the boat with my oldest auntie. And, he was sent to come and take care of the Methodist flock of immigrant workers. Some worked at a fishing cannery on the Windward side.

GK: Where did your grandfather preach?

GWEN: He went from camp to camp on different islands, including camps on Maui and Wahiawa on Oahu. He lived on the Windward side.

GK: What kind of education did you get as a child in Windward Oahu?

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GWEN: As I grew up and went to Waiahole School, Parker, then Castle High School; the only Koreans I knew were my biological relatives. The other Koreans were part Hawaiian or Japanese-Korean.

GK: How did it feel as a child growing up in a multi-cultural country setting?

GWEN: Oh, my God, I loved it in Kahaluu. We were a part of everybody's cultures. . . Every door in that community was open to me. We were like little animals running all around. (Laughs) Everybody took care of us. We would go into the Japanese house, and we'd run around and go to the Hawaiian house where Helena Akima would tell us spooky stories underneath a tree. We just adapted to the cultures. So when Kokua Hawaii members of other cultures visited our Kaneohe house, it brought back good memories.

GK: How about the adults?

GWEN: Well, women really had a hard life because the women would stay home and the men drank on the weekends. . . My father would go to "Termite" Pakele's house on the hill in Kahaluu, and they would drink from Friday night to Sunday night, and then they would wash up, go home, then work Monday through Friday. But the women stayed home and the men would just drink, do whatever.

GK: Really?

GWEN: She divorced my dad and lived alone with us—my younger sister and me. I was in the fifth grade. She was one of the first who ever divorced where we lived. I saw the hard life that my mother went through. We lived down the road from the state hospital. My mother was an LPN (Licensed Practical Nurse) there. We were raised on her income.

GK: How was that?

GWEN: We went from a life of comfort to poverty. Poverty is when you're so happy to have cans of food brought home from the hospital kitchen that have been given to my mother—stews and whatever. That's how she would supplement her income. . . I had to go to work when I was 12. I always tried to work to supplement our income.

GK: How did you do that?

GWEN: I found out that some friends were maids at the Marine Corp Air Station. So, I went to work there for the summer for a colonel. My mother said I started to eat so much it was hard to keep up with my appetite and everything. (Chuckles). I could go there, eat, and then come home on the weekdays. I think I worked for \$20 a month and food and housing on the weekends.

GK: So, how did you manage to get to the University of Hawaii?

GWEN: After I graduated in 1961 from Castle High, my dad kicked in money when we went to university, bought us cars. He worked as a car salesman. My sister and I worked after school and every summer.

GK: What kind of work did you do after college classes?

GWEN: I was a cashier at the movie theater in Kaneohe. During summers, we worked at the pineapple cannery.

GK: Were you always interested in social issues and activism?

GWEN: I was very interested in just general issues. As a University of Hawaii student for a time, I worked as an intern for one of the most powerful legislators, state Sen. Nadao Yoshinaga. I became very disillusioned by the attitude of some legislators who made disparaging remarks about people on welfare.

GK: What did you do?

GWEN: I earned my master's degree in social work in 1967 and got a job with the Legal Aid Society in Waianae. I worked with attorneys and did the community organizing for them.

GK: What kind of community organizing?

GWEN: I worked with a welfare rights group out there that was really successful. We fought against a proposed development in Makaha. I was very attracted to progressive issues. The issue of Kalama Valley came up, and one day, I just walked into the valley by myself.

GK: What made you decided to get involved in fighting the eviction in Kalama Valley?

GWEN: It was the inhumanity of it. We grew up with Hawaiians, and we were friends with them.

GK: How did your parents feel when they realized that you were aligning yourself with the Kalama Valley activists?

GWEN: My parents were divorced, and my mother Vivian had a disability from a stroke. But one of the things that I always remember about my mom was, she was a beautiful spirit and spunky as can be. When I asked for her advice, she would always say, "Gwen, what do you wanna do?" And no matter what I wanted to do, she would always support me and love me.

GK: Do you remember who you saw or spoke to in Kalama Valley when you first entered?

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GWEN: Kokua Hawaii members. They were providing the leadership. And I remember talking with Linton Park.

GK: Didn't Park attend the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis?

GWEN: Yes. There were quite a few people with impressive credentials who had decided to make a stand. Joy Ahn was a former aide to Patsy Mink who taught at Waianae High School. Soli Niheu, who I later married, was one of the leaders. He was working for Model Cities at Kalihi-Palama. He was the recreation director. Mary Choy was the wife of a prominent physician.



Henry "Soli" Niheu
Photo by Ed Greevy

GK: I remember Soli had a large black car.

GWEN: When he graduated from San Jose, his mother gave him a Pontiac Lemans. And that was what he drove.

GK: (Laughter) When I first saw him in that car, I thought he was a cop.

GWEN: He looked like a cop. (Laughter)

GK: What happened on the day of the Kalama Valley arrest on May 11, 1971? I know it was your intention to be arrested.

GWEN: When Soli and I rode out to Kalama Valley that day, we were alerted that the cops were all in the surrounding areas. They had sharpshooters in the back of the valley. The police wouldn't let us back in.

GK: Tell me about your late husband Soli.

GWEN: Soli was raised in Kalihi near Auld Lane. Auld Lane was a place where Niihau people lived in apartments in a rooming house. His father was from Niihau and a career National Guardsman. Soli's family was working class. Soli, along with his sister and one of his brothers, went to Kamehameha School. He came from a family that was very pro-American.

GK: So what made him change his mind?

GWEN: He actually had an experience in the Army in the South, where he was jailed and physically beaten. He was in basic training in the Army and went out with some friends of his for a night on the town. He was the designated driver. He agreed to drive because he doesn't drink alcohol. When he was coming back to the barracks, his fellow military

mates, who were there with him and had gone out with him, were intoxicated, but Soli was not. They were stopped by the military police and when they were questioned about what was going on, he was the only person that they actually questioned. They left alone the rest of the other men who happened to be white. When they pulled him out, they basically referred to him as a “n-----.” They wanted him to admit to doing some kind of wrong, and he refused to do so. They kept him in the brig for several days. They beat him up and they did that for several days, and nobody, none of his friends that he knew came to help him, and he was very much isolated and alone. It was an experience that led him to realize he was part of an occupied people, an occupied nation, and a path that led him to becoming an activist. He was deeply and heavily scarred from the experience and suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). That affected him for the rest of his life. It wasn't until he passed that I learned from his close friend Edyson Ching about what happened.

GK: How did you feel about George and his farm?

GWEN: I loved George, and I absolutely loved being close to the land. Even after the eviction in Kalama Valley, we all would go once a week on the slop run for George. I would drive George's truck, and Noel Kent rode shot gun. We'd pick up the slop. Then George would cook the slop. I felt proud to be part of feeding, feeding the world, you know, feeding the people. And I think being close to that pig farming and cleaning out, washing the pig sty, I felt there was a great dignity and pride to it.

GK: Tell me about your trips with Soli to fight evictions, after the Kalama Valley protests?

GWEN: After the forcible eviction at Kalama Valley, Kokua Hawaii members continued as an organization and expanded its presence fighting evictions in other communities. Some of us actually continued to live together as a collective and often held meetings at our house. We had a collective house in Kalihi.

Eventually, we were assigned to cadre groups to help various communities statewide. We were absolutely passionate about fighting evictions throughout the state. At the heart of it, we knew that we were up against huge forces, but Soli was very confident because we had really smart and dedicated and passionate people who were part of our core. I remember going with Soli to stay at Stanford and June Achi's home during the fight against the eviction at Niumalu-Nawiliwili on Kauai. It was an old country home. We stayed there for a week and discussed eviction strategies.

GK: What happened?

GWEN: There was a collective of people absolutely dedicated to supporting the eviction fight on Kauai. Stanford's daughter, George Cooper, and Sue Wagner were among them.

GK: How did he go about organizing?

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GWEN: Soli's style of organizing was real interesting. He didn't like having meetings with people. He would just go, and we'd hang out. It was really more talking stories with the organizers there. A lot of it was building trust and building that foundation of a relationship together.

GK: What other activities were you involved in?

GWEN: We went out and used to sell our newspaper the *Huli* for 25 cents. . . . It was a very agitational format—lots of pictures with information that hit the spot about what was happening and what we were doing in different communities. The *Hawaii Hochi* printed it, then later we printed it ourselves on our own press at our office in Kalihi. I think the *Huli* newspaper may have had a huge effect on people and agitating them.

GK: In what way did agitating have an effect?

GWEN: I think that what we were doing just resonated throughout Hawaii. We were part of the anti-Vietnam War movement and very disillusioned with the state of affairs, the deception, the horrible destruction. And then, we went into Kalama Valley where people were just being thrown away like rubbish without any regard.

Though we lost that struggle, we began to receive calls from people who faced evictions—the eviction of residents at Halawa Housing to make way for the Aloha Stadium. That was a big thing. Ted and Shirley Nahoopii were leaders of this struggle. Eventually, Roy Santana stepped in to become president of the Halawa Housing Association. Eventually, we were able to form a large coalition of community groups fighting evictions. Soli worked with Kokua Hawaii in organizing a “Stop All Eviction March” at Aala Park in Honolulu. It involved hundreds of people—all of the communities fighting evictions.

GK: Some historians have identified the arrest in Kalama Valley on May 11, 1971, as the start of the Hawaiian Renaissance. Could you describe how it happened?

GWEN: It was a personal journey for us, especially for Soli. In the process of fighting the evictions and trying to do all these kinds of things, Soli was revisiting his roots and looking for answers in his own culture itself. We actually studied the workings of the government and the system and Hawaiian history and culture and looked for the causes behind the evictions.

Soli grew up on Oahu, but Soli's father is pure Hawaiian, born and raised on Niihau, and his mother, pure Chinese. The Niihau people speak mainly Hawaiian. We visited Pakala on Kauai, which is near Niihau, to meet his relatives. I'll never forget how they brought in supplies when a boat came in. It was at night, and they would use a spotlight to light the boat. The entire process was all done in the Hawaiian language.

GK: There always seemed to be a lot of Kokua Hawaii members and supporters at your home, first in Kalihi and then in Kaneohe?

GWEN: We were all close and helped each other. We became family to each other. Pete Thompson and his girlfriend Sylvia lived in a two-bedroom house on Kam IV Road. We asked if George Santos could stay with Pete. Pete would tell us later that when he agreed, he never knew that George would stay with them there for the rest of his life.

GK: Why do you think members and supporters dropped by often?

GWEN: I think Hawaii people were drawn to us because we were a local group and we were living collectively in the two-story house in Kaneohe. Besides Soli and I and my mom who was disabled, there was Randy Suzuki and his girlfriend Sheila living upstairs, and Roland Nip and his girlfriend Renee downstairs. Joy Ahn would come and sleep on the couch.

GK: Joy would bring food and so would I.

GWEN: It was the best. It was really a movement of extended family members from different ethnic groups forming a core. It was very fluid, but it was structured. We all had our political jobs. That's wonderful that you would have a memory of that. We would always have food for visitors. We were the ohana of the movement. And, we would take care of each other. And that's why whenever people would need a place to stay or they wanted to stay, of course, they could stay. And, of course, we would always share whatever food we had. Those were really wonderful times and wonderful memories for all of us.

GK: It was amazing. Often, I counted 15 people for dinner. Of course, people would bring food and contribute what they could.

GWEN: (Laughter) At times, we'd have stew all the time because you could always stretch that with a lot of rice.

