Kokua Hawaii Oral History Project Interview with

Clyde Maurice Kalani Ohelo

Kalani Ohelo
Photo by Ed Greevy

Clyde Maurice Kalani Ohelo was among the 32 people arrested in Kalama Valley on May 11, 1971, for resisting the eviction of farmers and Hawaiians. At age 20, Ohelo served as a leader and dynamic speaker of the group Kokua Hawaii whose members led the eviction resistance and subsequently were involved as community organizers and supporters in battling other evictions statewide, as well as promoting a multi-ethnic coalition of poor and working-class people in several communities. He was featured in a* New Yorker Magazine *article, "Hawaii: The Sugar-Coated Fortress," as a new type of restless Hawaiian youth critical of Hawaii's economic and social direction. The article, written by Pulitzer Prize-nominated writer Francine du Plessix Gray, was later published by Random House in 1972 as a nonfiction book. Mr. Ohelo was interviewed by Gary T. Kubota from May 19, 2015, through October 3, 2016, at his home in Waimanalo and also at Queens Medical Center. At the time, Mr. Ohelo was suffering from acute diabetes, had lost a leg to the disease, and was undergoing dialysis. He died on April 7, 2018, from diabetic-related illnesses.

GK: Good morning, Kalani. Please tell me when and where you were born and something about your childhood?

KO: I was born in 1950 at Ewa Plantation Hospital. I was born blind. I was born with spinal meningitis. I was also born with club feet and a severe speech impediment. I also had bilateral neuropathy because of the forceps used on my head, pulling me out of my mom's womb. It killed all my nerves. So, I cannot show any expression. My muscles don't work in my face. That was pretty difficult. I could not speak a sentence of English until I was 11 years old.

GK: Wow. How did you overcome these physical challenges?

KO: Well, prior to becoming 11 years old, I went religiously to speech therapy. I went to different schools. I went to Pohukaina School, uh, for the severely retarded and less fortunate children. I also went to Sultan School of Speech Therapy, which was in Honolulu. All my speech teachers at the Sultan School were Japanese who graduated from the University of Hawaii. I cannot thank them enough. And I was living in Kalihi. I learned how to catch the bus. I learned how to get transportation or how to get around in Honolulu.

GK: Did you require operations for your sight?

KO: No. My eyesight came back when I was five years old. It just. . . came back after we went to church where they had hands-on healing from priest, ministers and reverends from 15 denominations. They would say prayers and all that, anoint me and others who wished to be healed. Then afterwards, we always had a paina (meal). We would eat, and then everybody went their separate ways home. So, I was with my grandparents and I was living with them in Ewa Plantation. So, we were on our way to Ewa Plantation, and we caught a stoplight in Pearl City right across the Pearl City Tavern.

GK: What happened?

KO: I was leaning back on the car seat, my eyes were open, and it was raining outside. I didn't know that. Anyway, when I closed my eyes and I opened my eyes, I saw all these raindrops hitting the window. And every time it hit the window, it burst into rainbows.

GK: Wow.

KO: And so that was the first thing I saw in my life.

GK: Amazing.

KO: Yeah, it is. So, my grandparents stepped out of the car and they gave praise and glory to God and saying, "Thank you."

GK: Right in the middle of the Kamehameha Highway?

KO: Right in the middle of the highway.

GK: (Laughter)

KO: We stayed there 20 minutes, I swear. At least 20 minutes.

GK: (Laughter) So your car was blocking traffic for 20 minutes?

KO: Small kind. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. But nobody yelled. Those days, nobody yelled at each other. They never know what was going on. They'd drive on the side and say, "You okay, kupuna?"

GK: What did your grandparents say?

KO: They explain the miracle. Some people got out and praised God, too. Anyway, when we got home, my grandparents called all my relatives—my cousins, my first cousins, my second cousins. My grandparents said, "You gotta come. A miracle has happened to our baby, Kalani." So, the next day, there was a luau in my grandparents' yard.

GK: Wow.

KO: Everybody was helping to prepare the kalua pig dinner and brought stuff over. It was a celebration to celebrate the beginnings of a new birth in life. "Now, he can see. We pray hard that he can talk. We pray hard that he will walk." So, that's how it all started.

GK: You were raised in what religion?

KO: My grandparents were Protestant. . . My father's side was Catholic.

GK: What did your grandfather do at Ewa Sugar Plantation?

KO: My grandfather was a luna (supervisor). He was a supervisor of welders.

GK: How was it on the plantation? Did you like it?

KO: Oh, yeah. My grandfather got along with other races. So during World War II, he helped other Japanese who were welders. . . He told them, "Go to Pearl Harbor, get a job, because right after the war, they're gonna be hiring. That way, you'll be working there already. . . They don't have to hire you. So, they all went. They were grateful. The local culture over there is that if you're grateful, you give something. My grandfather always got fish from them, cigars.

GK: Tell me about your grandfather?

KO: His name was Thomas Kaimuloa. My grandfather was a tall, handsome, middle-aged Kanaka Maoli. I'm Hawaiian-Spanish, going back to the early paniolo days. My grandfather and great-grandfather were paniolos at Kealakekua Ranch in Kona. They made their own saddles. That's one of the prerequisites of being a paniolo. You got to be good with your hands.

He also was a luna for the plantations in a good way. His privileges that were given to him because he was a luna, was he had an eight-bedroom house. So, he put all his family in there, and in the big lanai with screen. He had a Filipino yardman and a Portuguese cook. My grandparents spoke minimal Hawaiian language at home. They kind of discourage the younger ones from speaking Hawaiian.

GK: What about his education?

KO: He graduated from Kamehameha Schools and went back to the Big Island, where he and his brothers became deputy sheriffs of Waimea. . . He told me that those days he never had a car or a jeep. He had to go everyplace on a horse. He was a staunch Republican supporter. All the brothers, the whole family—they were close friends with the Campbells and other people who had big trust relationships with the banks. I was only six years old when he died.

I have good memories of him. Every time he would go to work, he would take a shower, light up his cigar, put me on his shoulder. We would walk two blocks to Ewa Shopping Basket. . . and he would tell me, "get whatever you like."

GK: Where did you go to school?

KO: The first school I went to was the Salvation Army Preschool in Halawa Housing. I went to that school because my parents worked in Aiea. My mom worked as a taxi dispatcher, and my dad was a taxi driver for the same company. (Laughter)

GK: Where did you go to high school?

KO: I went to Kaimuki High School. That's when I was living in Palolo Housing. We moved from Ewa Plantation, when my grandfather died. We moved to Kalihi and lived in Kam Housing near Farrington High School. Then from there, we moved to Palolo Housing where I went to intermediate and high school in Kaimuki.

GK: How was it?

KO: It affected my life to the point where it made me very angry. It affected my life to the point where I always wanted to hit someone. It affected my life to the point where if you even looked at me slightly, I would walk up to you and punch you in the eye. (Laughter)

GK: (Laughter)

KO: I couldn't communicate because of my speech impediment. Everybody used to think of me as a retarded and all of that. To get my point across, I'd say, "Eh, no stare at me. I'm not bothering you. Don't bother me." I got to fight for my right to exist, when somebody makes comments.

GK: What did you do?

KO: I started lifting weights. I started taking martial arts. I took judo when I was six years old. When I was eight years old, I took boxing. I worked on my club feet footwork (laugh). It was kind of awkward, but they taught me how to achieve balance. I got my club feet corrected when I was nine years old at Shriners Hospital in Honolulu.

GK: How did you deal with it mentally?

KO: I used to say to myself, "I'm not retarded. I can do math. (Chuckles) I can read." You know, I can read. I'm a great reader. I spent a lot of time at home because of my health. My dad bought me a full set of Encyclopedia Britannica. I educated myself.

GK: How did you go from reading to speaking?

KO: I studied cultures, different races, ethnicities, World War I, the Spanish-American War, World War II, the Korean War and all of that. I read all of it—A to Z. I was grateful for the encyclopedia because I could relate to the phonetics, and when I went to speech therapy, the therapist taught me how to enunciate the words by alphabet, then by syllables, then how to spell in syllables and put words together, then add another few words, and that's a sentence. That's how it all began in speech therapy.

GK: What did you think of your education in school?

KO: When I was in the first grade, I could understand right from wrong. I could understand that things were not right in terms of, why do I have to say, "I pledge allegiance to the flag. . . " or sing, "My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty. . . " when I wasn't feeling it?

I would ask myself, "How come? I live over there where they're mostly Hawaiians in public housings, but across the street are kids with nice clothes, nice toys, nice everything, shoes, everything." I gotta go to Salvation Army or get my clothes, hand-me-downs, from my cousins. I never complained, you know. I just wore it because I thought that was my clothes to wear. But everybody else knew that it was hand-me-downs.

GK: Were you aware of the differences when you moved into public housing in the city?

KO: When we moved into Kamehameha Housing in Kalihi, I knew where I lived the majority were Native Hawaiians, mostly locals who just moved out of the plantations. Outside the public housings, there were higher income and class categories the higher you go up in the mountains toward Alewa Heights.

GK: How was it?

KO: We found camaraderie among us. We were poor, and everything we did was without money. The children who lived across the housing projects had shiny bicycles. Their parents had two cars, nice shiny cars. My parents caught the bus. When I was five, I remember we had boxes made out of wood for furniture. To make it look nice, my dad painted it. When I went to visit my friends who lived outside the housing projects, they had rattan furniture or koa furniture. Nice stuff. I went home, asked my dad, "Dad, how come we have no more furniture?"

He goes, "Right now, we can't afford it." He ain't getting work. He was looking for a steady job, because he used to drive the bus in rural areas but then it shut down. He worked as a painter, carpenter, but it was all short-term work, because he had spinal problems.

He finally got a job as a bus driver with HRT (Honolulu Rapid Transit) owned by Harry Weinberg.

GK: What about your mom?

KO: My mom stayed home, I guess, because my dad was possessive, old-style, old school. . . My dad demanded his clothes was starched and ironed. I hated starched clothes. It was uncomfortable.

GK: How many brothers and sisters did you have and did you bring home lunch or pay for lunch?

KO: I had five brothers and two sisters. I made my own bread and butter, and my mother would give me milk money if we could afford it. But when I went to school, the teachers saw what students weren't eating right. So, out of the teachers' pocket, she got me lunch sometimes. She was a Japanese teacher, she was young, different generation than my other Japanese teachers.

GK: How were you and other Hawaiians treated in school in the 1950s and 1960s?

KO: Elementary school was the first place where I experienced racism. During those days, to be a Hawaiian meant you were in the lowest class of people, primarily because we were construction workers, service workers. Everything that the Filipinos do today, we used to do then. Everything the Koreans and other immigrants did now, we did. The stereotype kept us at the bottom.

GK: What was the stereotype?

KO: One day, my first grade teacher—she was Japanese—said, "Kenji and Nakamura-san, when you boys grow up, you boys will be good students and you boys will become lawyers and doctors. Kalani, when you grow up, you will be. . . one great truck driver."

I didn't want to be a truck driver because of my physical condition. I looked at her and I said, "I don't wanna be a truck driver." "What do you wanna be then?" she asked. "I wanna be a lawyer too," I said. She goes, "No, no, no, no, no. You cannot be a lawyer because Hawaiians are not lawyers. They're truck drivers." After that day, I hated her. She just wanted to put her foot on me and think that I was gonna let it go.

GK: Did you let it go?

KO: No. Every day, I had a question for her. "How come the rich. . . these people gotta be considered to be richer than our people because we lived in different locations even though it's only right across the street? My mom works. My dad works. How come they cannot have enough income to live across the street." So, I asked her, "How come?" She said, "I told you. Because you folks are Hawaiians."

I was getting angry at my parents. I used to go home and ask my mom questions. My mom used to say, "Look. We have what we have because that's the kinda jobs that we have. So, I want you to be patient because one day, you will get the things that you want in life. We're not the enemy. We're your parents." (Laughter)

So, uh, and all my life, I had Japanese teachers. Some were very good. Some were terrible. But, you know, they're all different. And that's what I noticed. Because I cannot blame my fourth, fifth grade teachers for what my first-grade teacher said to me. And I didn't. That's the way it goes.

GK: That's tough.

KO: And all my vice principals and principals were Japanese.

GK: (Laughter) Do you feel like as a Hawaiian in Hawaii, you're a victim of the tracking system?

KO: All the time. We all are. Whether we're working, whether we're going to schools, whether we're uh in the unions, or whether we're in the non-unions, the tracking system affects you throughout your whole life, sometimes without even your knowledge that it exists.

GK: How was it structured?

KO: Kaimuki was a different kind of school because most Hawaiians and Filipinos were in the same class. . . (Laughs) and Samoans. We're all in the same class, whether it would be math, science, history, English, P.E. The majority of the teachers that they had in the mid 50s were totally biased and were totally racist towards Hawaiians, Filipinos and whatever.

Even though I was just a kid, I understood what they said. I understood the segregation of each race and the purpose of it. The development of the tracking system is very important to the colonizers, very important to the school system because that's how they keep us in place. Yeah, by categorizing us, Section 1 to Section Y.

GK: (Laughter) What section were you in?

KO: I moved from Section 1 to Section 4 by the time I became senior in high school

GK: Section 4. And how many sections were there?

KO: Five. The top section was Section 5. I loved math and I loved science.

GK: That's good. I don't think I ever saw an "A" when I was going to school.

KO: (Laughter) Well, you see, in high school, I had teachers who looked at me as a human being. They knew that I had problems with speech and stuff like that. But they said, "You know, English is not the only language, even though it is a standard for American schools." My teacher said, "It's not the only language. Learn other languages. Become a linguist. Because that way, you can share with people. You can multiply the audience that you speak to by learning, by becoming a linguist, you know. You cannot do that when you only speak English.". . . I never became a linguist. I had a hard time just learning one language. (Laughter)

GK: How was your home life while you were in the housing?

KO: I became a problem with my father. He used to beat me up with a barber shop strap with the metal on the edge. I used to be black and blue from here way down to my ankles. I wore a long sleeve shirt and jacket to school. The teachers couldn't understand why and would ask, "Isn't it freaking hot? So when they told me to take off my jacket, I never like.

GK: So what happened?

KO: So one day, I took it off. The abuse wasn't handled well as it is today. Our days was, "Okay. The kid's beaten up. Maybe it's good for the kid." That was the cops' point of view. But I was loved by my maternal and paternal families. They each took turns in taking me in and raising me.

GK: Where did they live?

KO: Nanakuli, Waianae, Alewa Heights, Hawaii Kai before it was Hawaii Kai. My auntie from Nanakuli was like my second mom. She was my father's older sister. Every time she'd go to my house, she'd see me black and blue. She would start yelling at my father (laughter) and scolding him. And she told him, "What's wrong with you? You're not supposed to hit this boy. You may never know when he grows up, he might be gifted. You may never know. He's not failing you. You're failing him as a father." When I was eight years old and ten years old, I tried to stab my father with a tailor's scissors.

GK: Wow. . . What was your happiest moment as a child?

KO: Being with my cousins and family on their Hawaiian Homestead. My auntie's family had pigs, ducks, chickens. My auntie used to make her own beer.

GK: Who were your friends when you were growing up?

KO: All my friends. . . at the beginning of high school came from the housing. We grew up together. We knew each other's good habits, bad habits, religion, churches. We'd all go to the same churches. Then, the criminal elements slowly seeped into the group. And then, one by one, we had all these Johnny Mahoes in our group— that's the song that Brother Iz sang about.

GK: Tell me about it?

KO: That song was about Hawaiians who cannot find their way out of the criminal element or the environment where they come from. And it's very hard, especially if you're making good money, or what appeared to be good money to us.

GK: What was good money?

KO: Good money was anything made over $100.

GK: Yeah.

KO: So friends ended up stealing cars, taking them to the chop shop, selling auto parts, selling the engines, selling the tires, the stereos.

GK: What about you? What did you do for money as a teenager?

KO: Sometimes on weekends, my friends and I would walk from Palolo down to Waikiki in the morning. We'd open the newspaper vending machines and take the newspapers and sell them.

GK: On the streets?

KO: Mainly, we'd go up to the hotel rooms and sell them to visitors. You know, I'd say, "Good morning, sir. Would you like to buy the *Honolulu Advertiser.* It's full of information about the weather, entertainment, sales, real estate." We didn't have change so we got dollars in tip.

GK: What did you do with the money?

KO: Oh we'd buy lunch and pay for a cab to go back home.

GK: How was your high school social life?

KO: My problem was that my life was unbalanced because I couldn't get a girlfriend because of how I looked. (Laughter) So every day, I look at the mirror. I'd go, "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the best looking of them all?" The damn mirror never gave the answer. (Laughter)

GK: (Laughter) How did you make the transition?

KO: A good friend in my group—she went to St. Francis school—set me up for the prom with this beautiful Hawaiian girl. When I looked at her, I really felt insecure. You know what I'm saying?

GK: Oh, yeah.

KO: I went into my boyish bullshit stuff. So anyway, the girl asked me, "Are you uncomfortable?" I told her, "Yeah," and she goes, "Why?" I told her, "Because this is the first time in my whole life that I had an opportunity to sit close to a woman, to a young woman." And she goes, "And? What do you think?" I said, "I think it's wonderful. But right now, I wanna act like Jerry Lewis (laughter) and just get all googly-eyed and act nuts."

GK: Yeah.

KO: I told her how I felt in general in terms, of how important it was for me to have a relationship, whether it's holding hands, talking story, and all of that. I never did use the phone. I just felt like we shouldn't waste time on the phone, so I would take her hiking in the mountains. So, relationships were very important to me because instead of growing outward in having these relationships, I was growing inward. I felt like something was really wrong with me.

GK: How did you get involved in activism? How did that happen?

KO: Remember I shared with you earlier that I knew the difference between right and wrong?

GK: Yes.

KO: I knew that there was something wrong with how Hawaiians were treated, why we were being treated in such a way, in such a manner. How come I couldn't speak my own language? I used to ask my elementary school teachers then, from elementary, intermediate, all the way to high school. They had no answer because they didn't know the history. And because they didn't know the history, we were deprived of the truth. When you're deprived of your history, you really don't know what the hell is going on. And that's why the history is so important to me. I had an "A" in history, even though it wasn't our history. But I also had an A—believe it or not—I had an A in English. . . I had a B in Math.

GK: Were you involved in youth leadership activities in high school?

KO: You know, (sighs) again, it always falls back to being Hawaiian. They weren't ready to accept us as leaders. They were not ready to accept us as youth leaders. I applied to the YMCA. I applied to go to the YMCA Youth Legislature (chuckles). Rejected. So I went through this whole list of rejections, and I said, "Ah, what the hell. Maybe it's not my time yet." But I always knew that, there were ongoing things in the community and right outside the community.

GK: So what happened?

KO: When I was in high school, I met these two Vista (Volunteers In Service To America) workers who came from the mainland—one from New York and one from Oregon.

GK: How did you get to know the Vista workers?

KO: They asked youths in the housing, "Who's the leader over here?" And somehow, my name always got mentioned to them. So, they came to my house. They asked for Maurice. That's my school name.

KO: So I said, "I'm Maurice." And they go, "Hi. My name is Mark Bauer. And my name is Ted Height, and we work for Vista. And I asked, "Isn't that a color TV?" (Laughter)

GK: (Laughter)

KO: They go, "No, no, no. It's a social program to provide social services for poverty areas, such as Palolo Housing, KPT, Mayor Wright, et cetera, et cetera." So, I said, "Okay, come, come inside." So, my mom was cooking pork chops. And so I said, "Sit down. We'll go make a plate for you folks." So, my mom, she made pork chops and, you know, whatever.

GK: Yeah.

KO: They were surprised because they worked in Appalachia in Virginia. They said that the generosity and lifestyle there is very similar to Hawaii—they give you what they have to eat.

So, I said, "So, what else. . . are you folks connected with?" So, they said, "Do you know the name John Witeck?" I said, "Never heard of him." They said, "Well, John Witeck—he belongs to a small youth group called Youth Action. And he wanted to give you a job that would pay you only a stipend at first." I asked, "What's a stipend?" They said, "Well, a stipend is something like they give you $60 to $80 a month to go into the community, to learn how to do community organizing. Have you heard of Saul Alinsky?" I said, "Never heard of him." (Laughter)

GK: (Laughter)

KO: "Well, they're gonna train you how to become a community organizer by reading Saul Alinsky's books." I said, "Really? Is that how you become a community organizer? You read a book? I thought community organizers come from the community and they go and do whatever they need to do." And they go, "Oh, this kid is a little bit smarter than we thought." (Laughter)

GK: So what did you think of the Vista workers?

KO: Well, what I thought about at that time, when I first met them was that, "Why are these Caucasians so interested in our lifestyle, how we live?" I didn't wanna talk to them because I didn't wanna play somebody else's game. So I asked them point blank, "What is it that you see about my community that is so interesting to you, being that you're from Oregon, you're from New York?"

GK: So what was their point?

KO: They needed help because they wanted to start an alternative learning center because there were a lot of DOs—school dropouts in Palolo Housing—16 of them.

The Vista workers had no other person to go and talk to them. I said, "I can talk to them. But you gotta also give them stipends. And every month, you gotta have some place where they can all go to." Well, the principal of this new school was good friends with the music group SOS—Society of Seven.

GK: Oh?

KO: (Laughter) So every month, we went to see the SOS at the Waikiki Outrigger Hotel, and the band members recognized us from Palolo Housing and stuff like that.

GK: Cool.

KO: And, so, they asked us, "Who's got talent from Palolo Housing?" Everybody looked at me, and I'd go, "Come on. Come on, you guys. Don't look at me." (Laughter)

GK: (Laughter)

KO: My friends said, "This guy can sing." So, I sang a Tom Jones song with them.

GK: Cool. What song?

KO: "Green Grass of Home."

GK: Oh. That's a beautiful song. So what happened to you and your Palolo friends?

KO: So I gathered all my friends because they're dropouts from school. And the Vista workers and I wanted them to finish school, to get a degree. And to our surprise, it took them only a year and a half to get a GED (General Education Diploma, the equivalent of a high school degree). And when they got the GED, they were 16 years old, some 15 and 14.

GK: Wow.

KO: They got their GED. So, they didn't have to go to high school. That helped some of my friends a lot. Some of them went to HCC (Honolulu Community College) and KCC (Kapiolani Community College) and all that. And I was happy.

GK: What about you?

KO: I graduated from Kaimuki High.

GK: So did you meet other people than the Vista workers?

KO: They took me around with them. . . They introduced me to activists—anti-war, land activist, environmental activists. That's how I met Save Our Surf leader John Kelly. That's how John Kelly introduced me to ocean scientist Jacques Cousteau and Philippe, Jacques' son.

GK: Wow.

KO: They helped to enlighten me. John Kelly, Youth Action John Witeck, and Bishop Museum archaeologist Marion Kelly were some of my mentors. I had no experience. They explained to me about the environmental impact that's happening in this world because of the corporate structure not heeding its responsibilities to keep the earth clean, to keep this planet clean.

GK: Were there any other mentors?

KO: There were other women in our movement who were mentors to me—Setsu Okubo, who used to teach at Roosevelt, and her friends, her cohorts.

GK: How would they mentor you?

KO: They would share their history with me in terms of Ethnic Studies history, the experiences they went through on the plantations.

GK: Did your associations with them lead you to anything else?

KO: At one point, John Witeck with Youth Action said, "Look. I don't have money to pay you a regular salary, but I can give you a stipend every month to do community organizing for me." And I said to him, "I don't know nothing about community organizing." John said, "Look! What you've been doing working with the Vista workers, that's community organizing."

GK: How did you reconcile this whole thing with pacifism and what was happening?

KO: There are a lot of Hawaiian families who have become rednecks, and their children just followed their father. I wasn't a redneck, but I talked like one because my dad did, being close to my dad, my uncles, and my older male siblings. I could see John Witeck's point of view. I could see where he was coming from. He introduced me to the American Friends Service Committee. We became good friends. And I found out their values and my values were almost the same. So, I liked what they were doing.

GK: Did that change your feelings about issues?

KO: After I found out what war was all about, I became anti-war. For us guys from the ghetto, war was about going and participating and being a patriot for our country and to fight for our freedoms and all that. But there just was no connection between us and freedom. . . These wars are created through all these big corporations having conflicts in their interest in gas, oil, lumber, rubber and all of that. That was why Vietnam was important to the corporate structure.

GK: What was your feeling about what was going on?

KO: Well, there was a greater sense in me that wanted to see a political base here in Hawaii that could address the needs of the poor, that could address the needs of all ethnicities, and basically, poverty-driven type of communities. What that meant to me was that we needed social change, political change, economic change.

GK: There's a lot of land ownership concentration in Hawaii. Back in 1969, a book called *Public Land Policy in Hawaii* was published disclosing that about 93 percent of the land in Hawaii was owned by 100 or less individuals, corporations, trusts, and government entities. How do you feel about that?

KO: Everybody knows about that elephant in the room. But they refuse to change the status quo for whatever reason—social norms, financial advancement. . . Everybody has their own reason why they're doing what they're doing in this system. And this is the only system that they know of. . . There cannot be equality when there are two classes of people—the rich and the poor.

GK: What about the state Legislature and those elected to office?

KO: At the state Legislature, you have all these senators and representatives who are associated with businesses, interlocking directorates. What that means is that they will spend more time working for their business interest than the interest of the people who voted them in. So, what that means is that all of us who organized to hold campaign signs for them, all we got was a case of beer, hotdogs and chili. I don't care where you go in this world, they can call it a democracy, they can call it whatever, but there can be no democracy when there are two classes of people: the rich and the poor. If there is two classes, such as that in any country, then it'll always favor the rich and never the poor. So that is why we have all these conflicts today.

GK: Tell me about the geo-political tours you conducted while a member of Kokua Hawaii in the 1970s?

KO: I would start basically in Kalama Valley. I'd take them through the valley. This is what the nursery man does. This is what people who worked in the nurseries do. This is what people who take care of horses do. This is what the pig farmers do. This is what the other nursery flower man do. They sell flowers. And their lifestyle depends on how much they put out in volume, and how open the market is to them. . . I would take them to where all the important and unimportant decisions were made, state Legislature. Give them a brief history of the United States Congress and DHHL (Department of Hawaiian Home Lands). Then, I'd talk about Aloha Aina, and what we mean by Aloha Aina. I'd also talk about the U.S. Congress who create and passed racially biased policies to oppress people of color, in this case, Native Hawaiians.

GK: How did you and Larry arrange to speak in Oahu Prison?

KO: I called up Larry, and I said, Larry I met this guy from Waimanalo, and he's a social worker and been working with the prisoners for the last 10 years, and he's got a club inside of the prison called the Blue Moon Jaycees. All the fund-raising from them every year went to the school kids or the students at Waimanalo Elementary and Intermediate. The social worker was looking for someone outside the prison community who could think, interpret, talk like them. . . We met them. I talked to them about Kalama Valley. I knew some of them, the younger ones that were from Palolo Housing. I'm talking about 20 brothers and sisters. Like me, they hated the system, but we did different things to try to resolve the problems. . .They were all hyped. They never like us to go home. They were telling the guards, "I think these guys should stay here for a couple of weeks."

GK: What percentage of the prison population were native Hawaiian? Fifty percent?

KO: More than that.

GK: As a member of Kokua Hawaii, you and Edwina Moanikeala Akaka went to conferences on the U.S. continent. How did that happen?

KO: There was an Asian conference going on there and also a meeting with the Young Lords. I don't know why. And I said, who do you most want to go represent Hawaii? And the Kokua Hawaii group said, "You're one of them." I don't know what to say. That was the first time I've been off of this island.

GK: So, Kalani, when did you go to New York to visit the Young Lords?

KO: It was in November 1970. Kokua Hawaii also wanted two people to represent them at the Black Panthers' conference in D.C. in late October. So, we got on a train from New York to Washington, DC. That was the first time I've been on a train.

GK: So what happened?

KO: So, I was up there with shorts and T-shirt, and it was winter in New York.

GK: (Laughs)

KO: (Laughs) And I go, "It's cold over here."

GK: (Chuckles)

KO: So they rode with somebody to go get some winter clothes. They dressed me up, with the sunglasses. . . I looked exactly like Malcolm X.

GK: (Laughs) So, what did you learn?

KO: Through visiting all of these small political groups, I learned how people of color dealt with oppression, that programs need to exist to fight the oppression. . . Slowly, things gradually began to sink into me. I started to feel the militancy that the Young Lords and the Black Panther Party had.

GK: The Young Lords (Puerto Ricans, formerly a street gang) were involved in fighting evictions from buildings?

KO: Yes. I was there at that time. The buildings that they were protesting against the evictions were actually abandoned buildings in East Harlem. Families who couldn't afford rent or even electricity or heat during the winter time moved into these buildings.

GK: Tell me about these buildings?

KO: There was no running water, electricity, so and so forth. So, a lot of people provided their own generators, enough for three apartments, and they shared the cost of the generator—the maintenance, the gasoline, everything.

GK: You stayed there?

KO: I stayed with a family. The rats were half feet long and were in the same room the children were in. I cannot go sleep when the rats are running around. One morning, I started chasing them and whacking them (laughs). I'm not used to that. So, the ones living in the room said, "Relax. They're not gonna harm us, they know us." "Oh, really?" I said.

GK: Despite the cold, they still got evicted from the buildings?

KO: They still got evicted from abandoned buildings. Correct.

GK: What happened after the evictions?

KO: They went back about two or three times. The Young Lords had a base that they were working out of—a Catholic church.

GK: Right. They had a breakfast program for children before they went to school?

KO: Their programs were similar to the Black Panthers. . . I found out that the social services that the Young Lords Party was providing was replicated through what the Black Panthers did.

GK: Where else did you go?

KO: We went to Chicago for a couple of days with the Young Lords, Oakland with the Black Panthers, UC Berkeley, San Francisco. I had about six speaking engagements.

GK: What did you talk about?

KO: Kalama Valley. I gave a historical overview about the haole oligarchy going against King Kalakaua prior to 1890, the marines and the Queen's abdication, not a surrender, saying she conceded to the U.S.

GK: Who did you meet in San Francisco?

KO: I met Carmen Chow. She was with I Wor Kuen (a group helping to fight against an eviction at the International Hotel in San Francisco.)

GK: What did you learn on these trips?

KO: I learned about the importance of building social-political consciousness and how important it was as a tool for minorities, as a tool for Native Americans, as a tool for Native Hawaiians. These Puerto Rican and African American leaders were saying, "Look. We are the same no matter what color we are. But the thing is that we are not treated the same. We are treated so differently and so oppressively that we need to find other avenues and to get our expressions out in terms of how we feel, how we think, how we write, our art, our culture."

GK: What did you think about that?

KO: These leaders—Bobby Seale, Angela Davis—were great. They themselves were prolific writers and they were terrific speakers. Bobby Seal became the mayor of Oakland. He was teaching in Berkeley, and he was teaching a seminar that Larry Kamakawiwoole attended as a student.(Laugh) Larry at first got cultural shock when he went into the class, but he said it made sense and it all started coming together. And I said I know that. I used to be like that. Larry, he sort of sounded like Martin Luther King, and I told myself I'm going to follow this guy. When we ended up in the same organization I was so happy. At the same time, I didn't know that Larry was going through some emotional change in the 1970s, especially when his name came up to be the Ethnic Studies director at University of Hawaii–Manoa campus.

GK: Okay. So you were influenced by the Black Panthers, Young Lords, and Martin Luther King. Who else?

KO: Malcolm X. I read all his books. He helped me.

GK: In what way?

KO: He helped me to become more analytical in politics, in economics, and in things that are not happening that should have been happening. . . I was able to dream if these things did happen, these would be the possible changes that would take place.

GK: How did that help you? I know there was talk among Kokua Hawaii members about physically resisting the eviction, rather than passive resistance.

KO: I think it's very, very important to ponder as a circle of leaders in terms of, "What do we do now? What should we do now? Is this more of a right avenue to go? Let's choose and make our own roads." Leaders have to take responsibility for every death, every injury that occurs in the group. This resistance was against the policies of the United States and the state and corporations, not against just a police department. We're not going to fight the Army, the Marines, the Navy, the Air Force, the Coast Guard with rifles and your bullets. . . The thing is that we wanted to create something that would catch on, like a fire, just (whooshing sound) right through the islands. Civil disobedience, non-cooperation was the way.

GK: Who were people you thought were successful in doing this?

KO: Well, Mahatma Gandhi (leader of the independence movement in India) and Phil and Daniel Berrigan (brothers who were Catholic and protested against the Vietnam War by burning draft card records). In Hawaii, we had many— John Witeck, the American Friends Service Committee, and John and Aiko Reinecke.

GK: How did you meet Larry Kamakawiwoole?

KO: I met him at the Youth Congress in 1969 on the University of Hawaii campus. I stayed in a dormitory. I think I might have met him also a few times before through John Witeck, and Mervyn Chang, and Van Kralingen who ran the *Hawaii Free Press* on School Street.

GK: How was the Youth Congress?

KO: It was totally interesting. We had the pro-war guys, the anti-war guys, then thrown into the debate were land troubles, and the things that were happening on the land like evictions of Hawaiians. . . The relationship between Larry and I started when I met him at the Kokua Kalama Valley meetings with the residents. What drew me closer to him was his speaking abilities, and how he speaks to students, how he speaks to Native Hawaiians, how he speaks for Native Hawaiians. He was always astute about being definitive about history. History is like a weapon to us because we have the ability to make an analysis. . . to bring out the truth. When he has an open forum, an open door to speak his mind, he does it very eloquently like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

GK: What did you think about the discussions about evictions?

KO: I don't know if you can call it ethnogenocide, or whatever, but that's what it looks like. When you go through an eviction, bulldozers come. The families are outside of the house. All of their belongings are inside of the house. And the trauma and the terror continues on to the point of impact where everybody either get arrested or they walk away. And it's hard to walk away, especially if you are indigenous to this island, to this land. It's hard to walk away from that. It's hard to walk away from your memories. It's hard to walk away from your relationships from that community. Because you take it with you wherever you go for the rest of your life.

GK: How was the state Capitol demonstration organized in November 1970?

KO: Before the rally, we had a big meeting at John Kelly's house. Kelly said he was going to represent the environmental side. I know Save Our Surf was involved in protecting the environment and opposed to the development of Magic Island. I said I would be coming from what I've been saying at all of the high schools, encouraging youths to focus on their vision. I talked about Kalama Valley. I talked about the plantation system. I talked about the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy. I talked about the misuse of Hawaiian Homes lands. Lo and behold, the crowd understood that.

GK: Who were some of the students?

KO: At Setsu Okubo's class at Roosevelt, there was Eric Gill (a future labor leader), Roland Kotani (a future legislator), and Sylvia Thompson (a future activist and restaurateur).

GK: Where else did you speak?

KO: I spoke at Kamehameha Schools several times. Each time, there were Bishop Estate trustees. . . I'm not against educating Hawaiians. It's the other part of what they're doing. It's the intent of Bishop Estate as a real estate business.

GK: How did you meet Soli (Henry Soli Niheu)?

KO: We met at the Youth Congress. He was the recreation director at Palama Settlement.

GK: Who arranged the interview with Francine du Plessix Gray who wrote about Kokua Kalama and you in the book, *Hawaii: The Sugar-Coated Fortress*?

KO: She found me through John Witeck. For some reason, she was directed to the

American Friends Service Committee who called John, who told John what this lady was in Hawaii for. She was a writer for the *New Yorker,* the magazine. And she wanted to speak to a Native Hawaiian, and she heard about me. So, she asked to meet with me.

GK: Where did you meet?

KO: I met her up in the Nuuanu Pali area, sitting amongst the gingers and awapuhi in the bamboo forest. That's where I held the first interview with her.

GK: What was your impression of her?

KO: I'd never met a French lady before. (Laughs) She was very tall, very pretty, very slim, but aristocratic. Her husband was a master artist and well-known. She's a very complete person.

GK: Do you remember what she asked?

KO: She went through this whole clinical thing about Hawaiians being overthrown, about asking me who I was, where I was born, what kind of education background I had, uh, my involvement in the movement, what's so important about being involved in the movement? Then the discussion just snow-balled. Then it became something good for her, because it helped her write the book, *Sugar-Coated Fortress.*

GK: How did it snow-ball?

KO: I introduced a lot of other people to her—Pete Thompson (University of Hawaii Ethnic Studies instructor), John Kelly (Save Our Surf founder). She met George Cooper (later co-author of *Land and Power In Hawaii*). She interviewed them also, and then her story got better and better. Everything started to expand, in terms of what is interlocking with the legislative connection, what is interlocking with the financial systems, with the corporate structure here and the Pacific Basin, and the importance of the Pacific Basin. . . Everything revolved around the sugar plantation system, the Big Five.

GK: What was the reasoning behind having Kokua Hawaii as a multi-ethnic group?

KO: In one of our critical and important meetings at Kokua Hawaii, we discussed the multi-national question, specifically what do we think about foreigners on this island and how do we treat them. There were many, you know we had something like 28 Kokua Hawaii members and associates at that meeting. It ended up like 18 different versions. Most of them were for getting rid of the foreigners. I spoke last. I always speak last because I want to hear what everybody has to say. I said, after hearing everyone, that number one—we cannot disregard or dismiss any other race from these islands.

The more ethnicities we have involved, the more numbers we gain. Numbers create the majority. Majority is what changes the situation. Collectively, we can change that. And collectively we can become the majority. We need to focus and concentrate on creating a majority. I'm talking about majority vote in the Democratic Party, majority vote in the Republican Party, majority vote in any political party. But we need the majority.

GK: What do you think of the Hawaiian sovereignty movement?

KO: The Native Hawaiians are still struggling. We have 20, 30 plus sovereignty groups who have different political and social consciousness on how to resolve the problems of land ownership, land leases, taxes. How can we become self-sufficient and have self-determination when we don't even have a tax system that would take care of our needs?

GK: Tell me about some programs developed for Native Hawaiians in the early 1970s?

KO: I was a part of the first Native Hawaiian language preschool. It was in Waimanalo. The first person to help us with developing this program was kupuna Lilia Hale.

GK: Tell me about Kahuna Sammy Lono who supported Kokua Hawaii?

KO: I was very close with uncle Sam Lono. I always used to go to his place up in Haiku at least two to three times a week.

GK: Why did you go there?

KO: He wanted me to become an assistant to him. I told him I got a growing family. I've got to work. I was also attending Hawaii Loa College at the time.

GK: I know you've spoken with Kalama Valley residents after the eviction. Have they shared their feelings with you about the eviction?

KO: When I meet these people, even until today, they talk about it. So that indicates to me that, you know, they're still hurt a little bit. . . the anger of being defeated by something that you cannot see is very traumatic for all people.

GK: How did you feel about the Kokua Hawaii leadership's decision in Kalama Valley to ask non-locals to leave the valley before the arrest?

KO: Larry and I went that night to a meeting outside the valley with Bishop Estate trustees. That meeting in Kalama Valley should have included Larry and I, and not excluded us. It was a major decision. . . I was very concerned about how the news media would take this. . .

GK: I know that in Kokua Hawaii, people came from different backgrounds and beliefs. Some were Marxist, Maoist, peace activists, and people in favor of farmers' rights and Native Hawaiian rights. Where were you in this?

KO: I was never anti-Christian.

GK: So how did you resolve these conflicting interests?

KO: It was never a conflict because, to me, our practice of Aloha Aina is part of the culture. To respect an indigenous culture is the highest respect any indigenous people can receive. The truth is there is no contradiction or conflict in Aloha Aina.

GK: What about the Kokua Hawaii studying Maxist-Leninism?

KO: We had to read all that stuff to understand what social consciousness meant globally, and what it meant at home.

GK: How did Kokua Hawaii manage to grow in membership into dozens of organizers and associates?

KO: It grew because of the political education, internal political education that we were having because it stirred up a lot of people. . . especially in its multi-ethnic concept of leadership. If you looked around the room at our meetings, we were not all Native Hawaiians. So, we weren't talking about one thing; we talked about everything.

GK: So what happened?

KO: It got to the point where a big coalition protested at the state Capitol in 1970-71. Thousands of people—Kokua Hawaii, environmentalists, social action groups, social justice groups, Save Our Surf, American Friends Service Committee. We also had teachers in high schools who supported us—Setsu Okubo from Roosevelt, Aiea High School teacher Glenn Oshiro.

GK: What was happening in the year before the arrest and during the protest against the eviction?

KO: The Bishop Estate said no matter if they had to breach the leases, they would compensate for that breach to the lessees. George refused. . . All of the residents that were left refused. . . But at the same time, Hawaiian Homes intervened and offered some Native Hawaiian residents who were on its waiting list homes in Waimanalo. So, that's how the migration from Kalama Valley to Waimanalo took place. My family lives right around the block from some Kalama Valley residents.

GK: So, that's why by the time of the arrest of 32 people in Kalama Valley, most of the residents had moved or were getting ready to move?

KO: Yeah.

GK: Well, you can't really blame them?

KO: We didn't. We didn't. In fact, we were happy for them. At the same time, Kokua Hawaii was working to develop an alternative proposal for housing. Larry and I never had the chance to follow through with the plans that we had. We had John Waihee, who was a planner for Model Cities (later to become governor). We asked him to make our plans for low-income, middle-income and high-income in that valley.

GK: What were your hopes when you were in the movement?

KO: My hopes and aspirations while in the movement was to do my job. My job was to raise social and political consciousness. And to raise social and political consciousness, you would have to do tons and tons of research. And those days, we used to put all our research into our heads. We didn't have computers. We didn't have all the high-tech things we have today. I just spoke about colonialism and how it affects us in so many diverse ways and how it's responsible for our behaviors, how it affects our jobs.

GK: What do you think about the current sovereignty movement and the dozens of sovereignty groups?

KO: I have a lot of thoughts and emotions. First of all, I think that there are a lot of people who are self-proclaimed Hawaiian leaders and stuff like that. And, in actuality, they steer away from what makes them accountable, makes them responsible for the things that they say. Especially if they start talking negatively against other Hawaiian indigenous people and organizations, because once they do that, they're mocking the whole movement.

GK: What do you think of the leaders in social movements in Hawaii?

KO: We need to take a stronger look and a better look at the Hawaiian leadership as well as the local leadership of the movement. Leadership in the movement is very. . . indecisive in terms of what they're trying to say. They seem to conflict with each other. That's not good. The main thing is lokahi, unity. We need to stress lokahi and how important that is as a virtue for not just Native Hawaiians, but all people in the movement.

GK: What do you think about the current leadership or the people who are connected to academia? Do you have any opinions at this point?

KO: It has changed. More Hawaiians have more opportunities now to attend college and to get a college degree. My wife is an example of that and other Hawaiians are examples of that. You and I know in terms of the colonial process, this is an example of colonization at its highest. So, where do we go from here? Do we say that universities are no good? Do we say that college is no good? No. We don't say that. We cannot say that because it has its plus and minuses. Well, you're a graduate yourself.

GK: In journalism (Laughs)

KO: That's a Cross (reference to Christian cross and bearing witness and responsibility). I call it a cross. I think it's how it's applied.

GK: So how do you feel now, looking back at what you've done in the movement?

KO: I've never given up on the movement. In fact, before 1985, we got involved in the Makapuu occupation standoff, we got involved in the Waimanalo Beach Park beach arrest. Our thing was to teach the Native Hawaiians on the beach that you must remember that we are all on the waiting list for Hawaiian homestead lands. The lands that we are camping on at Waimanalo Beach Park is our lands, Hawaiian Homes lands. But they want to say that it is public lands. It is not public lands. It is land illegally given to the City and County.

The majority of the people who were living on the beach didn't know how to research issues. We helped to teach them how to research issues. We taught them what to read. We sent them to the Legislative Reference Bureau and other places, not just to gather information on Hawaiian Homestead but also on public ceded lands.

So, in that meantime while we were organizing on Waimanalo Beach, the Native Hawaiians grew in terms of political and social consciousness. They grew in terms of having more self-respect for who they are and what they are. . .

GK: Do you regret anything as far as being an activist?

KO: I don't regret anything that I have done in the past in serving our people, because that's what it's all about, to serve the people. I have no regrets at all, and I love each one who participated in our organization. We all learned and became better people.

God has blessed me in meeting the right people at the right time. Because I had other ideas and concepts of Caucasians until I met John and Mark and all these other haoles. They were very smart, very intelligent. . . not on all or everything, but a lot of the things that they shared with me made sense. . . As a Kokua Hawaii leader, I always sought a second opinion, (laughs) I always came back to Pete Thompson, Larry Kamakawiwoole, and Joy Ahn (Kokua Hawaii member who was a former aide to Congresswoman Patsy Mink).