

KOKUA HAWAII ORAL HISTORY PROJECT INTERVIEW WITH
Dwight Yoshimoto



Dwight Yoshimoto
Photo courtesy Gary Kubota

Dwight Yoshimoto supported anti-eviction efforts in Kalama Valley and was a member of a Kokua Hawaii team who helped with marketing and finance. One of the major fund-raising activities included Kokua Hawaii's annual Huli Kakou concerts featuring Hawaiian music at the University of Hawaii-Manoa Andrews Amphitheater and later at the Waikiki Shell. Yoshimoto, who received a bachelor's degree in marketing at the University of Hawaii, eventually became an assistant vice president at Bank of Hawaii. He was interviewed in a car parked near Restaurant Row in Honolulu on March 22, 2017, by Gary T. Kubota.

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

DY: I was born in 1950 in Honolulu and raised in Damon Tract, which was mainly a farm area.

GK: Where was that?

DY: Damon Tract bordered Nimitz Highway from Lagoon Drive all the way to John Rodgers Airport. It included the whole industrial area and the Honolulu International Airport.

GK: How was living in Damon Tract?

DY: It was an experience that made me want to get involved with Kokua Hawaii. I was raised on an egg farm with my paternal grandparents in the 1950s. There were people who were truck farmers, very working class, from the plantations. They were from low to not even middle class. I have a lot of fun memories. It was a very safe place. Then we got evicted about 1959-60.

GK: What happened?

DY: Damon Estate, a major landowner, sold the land. The area was subdivided. My grandfather and father Yasuhide looked at relocating the egg farm. The only other place was Waianae. It wasn't practical. So, my grandfather Kame Yoshimoto retired, and my

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father picked up some trades as an occupation, first was an electrician, and then he became an elevator mechanic.

GK: What do you remember about the eviction?

DY: It was funny because, actually, my grandfather was a caretaker or head gardener for Damon Estate, so we were the last family to leave Damon Tract. I remember being all alone. Nobody else was around. Just us.

GK: So at that time, you lived in an extended family?

DY: Yes, along with my grandmother Uto. I had a brother and two sisters. My grandparents were from Okinawa. My grandfather had worked as a pineapple farmer in Paia, Maui, then the Yoshimoto clan moved to Oahu.

GK: After the eviction from Damon Tract, where did you move?

DY: We moved to Kalihi, which was a major shock because we had a half-acre egg farm and two-story farmhouse, then we moved to a real termite-eaten, dilapidated old three-bedroom house in Owene Lane in Kalihi. So that was a shock.

GK: Where'd you go to school?

DY: Fern Elementary in Kalihi.

GK: How was it attending Fern?

DY: The first day of school was a culture shock. That was third grade for me. I got beaten up by the class bully and his tomboy friend. In Damon Tract, we used to fool around but never really had fights. . . Well, I can't say I got into a fight. I did not know how to fight. I got false cracked (chuckles). So that was a learning experience.

GK: So what happened?

DY: My father enrolled my older brother, Milton and I in judo at the Kalihi YMCA, so we could defend ourselves. It proved very handy living in Kalihi.

GK: (Laughter) I took judo too.

DY: Yep. Yep. Yep. That was a good eye-opener.

GK: So, when the Kalama Valley struggle happened, were you at the University of Hawaii?

DY: Yeah, I was a sophomore or junior in 1970. I paid my way through college. So, starting my sophomore year, I went to school part time, and working full time.

GK: What were you doing working full time?

DY: I was a janitor at the Hawaii Newspaper Agency. Graveyard shift.

GK: So, how did you get involved in Kalama Valley?

DY I had been following the issue in the news media. Again, I got involved because I had the experience of getting evicted as a farm family from Damon Tract. I could definitely empathize with the farmers in Kalama Valley. I wanted to do something about it. . . The deal at Damon Tract has been called one of the greatest land sale coups in Hawaii's history. Like Kalama, it was all about kala, the money.

GK: So, you felt it was an injustice, basically.

DY: Oh, definitely.

GK: Did you go by yourself?

DY: I went with my friend Al Abreu. I went to Farrington High School with Abreu. He and I were always political.

GK: What was your impression, when you went into the valley?

DY: At that time, Kalama Valley was very barren. It was very arid. It was hot. I remember the kiawe trees and the wind being very hot and dusty. So, it was amazing that the farmers could make the valley productive.

I remember small kid time, we used to have family friends who were pig farmers in Kalama Valley. At that time, when we got involved in 1971, I think most of the pig farms were moved out already. Our focus was obviously doing whatever we could to help pig farmer George Santos.

GK: What happened?

DY: We had a lot of meetings involving strategy. . . I remember one of the things we had to truly work out was defining what was local or being Hawaiian. I'm Okinawan, and Al's Portuguese. I know in the beginning, there were some people involved that said it should only be Hawaiian or Native Hawaiians. We had to struggle through that issue. Fortunately, we figured out that it's not the blood. It's the heart that makes you Hawaiian.

GK: How many months were you there before the eviction on May 11, 1971?

DY: I can't remember. Probably February or March. I was going to school part time, and I was in the valley part time.

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GK: What happened on the day of the eviction?

DY: On the day of the eviction, I was actually in school. So, I missed out in getting arrested. (Laughter) It was pretty sad for me not to be involved. I remember, when I heard it over the radio, I drove to Kalama Valley and tried to sneak back into the valley through the back roads. But everything was blocked. I couldn't get in past the barricades even through the back doorways through Hahaione Valley. I remember watching from the barricades, the whole event—all you guys being up on the roof. (Chuckles)

GK: (Chuckles)

DY: A week or two before the arrest, I had a big family meeting with my father and mother and my grandparents about the possibility of getting arrested. My parents were very resistant about me getting arrested. So, I said, you know, "Let's, let's leave it up to grandma and grandpa. And then you interpret properly," because my grandparents couldn't speak English. I couldn't speak Japanese or Okinawan. I believe my father interpreted my words right, my emotions right because at the end of the meeting, my grandfather and grandmother gave their approval. Should I get arrested, no problem, no family shame. Stand up for what you believe is right.

GK: Wow.

DY: They actually believed in what I did. Having been evicted themselves, they understood my position. Unfortunately, I didn't get arrested. (Laughter) All of the supporters were upset about the sheer arrogance of Bishop Estate. . . just because they were the landlords. . . That's what infuriated a lot of us.

GK: Okay. So, let's fast-forward. After the eviction, you stayed with Kokua Hawaii and worked with Soli Niheu on the financial end?

DY: Right. I had saved money working for the Hawaii Newspaper Agency. I helped initially put the down payment on the first month's deposit for Kokua Hawaii's office on Palama Street.

GK: Then there was the first Huli Kakou concert at Andrews Amphitheater?

DY: Yes. I helped with the deposit for the first Huli Kakou concert.

GK: How much was that anyway?

DY: I think I put up either \$2,000 to \$3,000 for the office and the show. Al Abreu and I were very involved with Huli Kakou. After the concert, Kokua Hawaii gave me back my money. (Laughter)

GK: Well, I remember seeing a full house at Andrews Amphitheater and thousands at the Waikiki Shell and thinking, Holy smokes! There are some people in Kokua Hawaii with some business organizing tools.

DY: Right. Well, I think it helped that Al Abreu and I were on the UH Campus Board concert committee as freshmen. We helped to bring the Steve Miller Band to perform in 1968 and 1969. We knew what to do for the most part.

GK: How did the idea for the Huli Kakou concert evolve?

DY: I'm not sure whose bright idea it was, but it did make sense. We figured we could get entertainers to donate their talents. At that time, Al "Alapai" Abreu was a disc jockey for University of Hawaii radio station KTUH. Even though KTUH was kind of a rock station, he had contacts with the Hawaiian entertainers. So, I believe for the most part, Al and I were the lead recruiters. Our primary function was to recruit entertainers.

GK: Were the Huli Kakou concerts different than other concerts?

DY: Huli Kakou was more of a political awareness thing, a fundraiser for Kokua Hawaii. But, again, we had all these speakers obviously from Kokua Hawaii primarily educating the audience.

GK: Which entertainers did you approach?

DY: I know we talked to Auntie Genoa Keawe when she was playing a gig in Waikiki on Kalakaua. We talked to Hui Ohana and Dennis Pavao. The Hui's manager Gordon Helm was one year older than us from Farrington High. I grew up with the Cazimeros. That's how we got Peter Moon and the Cazimeros—Sunday Manoa. It wasn't easy because at that time, Bishop Estate had a reputation. Not everybody jumped on board at our first meeting. It took us some time to persuade them because essentially we were fighting Bishop Estate. At that time, nobody really wanted to fight Bishop Estate. We had Palani Vaughan, Moe Keale (member of Sons of Hawaii) was definitely involved. One of my fondest memories of that time, was when Auntie Genoa blessed Abreu and me as "Hawaiians"—not just Portuguese and Okinawan. As she said, it was the heart, not the blood.

GK: How many attended the events?

DY: It's hard to remember. It was a full house at Andrews and a full house at the Shell. Tickets were \$2. We made money. It was enough to economically support our work in the communities.

GK: When did you stop your activities with Kokua Hawaii?

DY: I think it was in 1973. It was just time for me to graduate (laughter). I just got mentally and physically exhausted because I was still working full-time, midnight to

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8 a.m., went to UH part-time, then did Kokua Hawaii stuff. Something had to give. I lost 15, 20 pounds because of these activities.

GK: What did you do once you graduated from the University of Hawaii?

DY: After graduating, I was a sales representative at Sea Life Park, then at Gray Line, then I went into banking. I was a junior vice president of marketing at Central Pacific Bank. I did CPB's annual report. Then Clarence Lee who did the annual reports for Bank of Hawaii recommended me for a job at Bank of Hawaii. I became the corporate director of public relations for Bank of Hawaii, an assistant vice president.

GK: How was it?

DY: It was a good move because BankoH, obviously, is a lot bigger than CPB and a lot more diversified. So, I got to do a lot more things. Bank of Hawaii was great because I got involved with the Aloha Bowl, got to meet Mackey Yanigasawa (sports promoter and manager of Aloha Stadium). State legislator Milton Holt, who was at that time BankoH's director of community relations, and I did the BankoH Slack Key concert, organized by the City & County of Honolulu. We did the Bank of Hawaii Molokai Hoe canoe race. I used to paddle canoe for Waikiki Surf Club. Our crew was famously known as "The Banzai Crew" as we were all local Asians—very unusual in Hawaiian canoe paddling..

GK: You were involved in the beginning of BankoH's sponsorship of the Molokai-Oahu canoe race?

DY: Actually, all the funds for the slack key concert and the Molokai Canoe Race in the 1980s came out of my public relations budget. I was the one who pitched the bank and I was the one who helped to persuade bank officials to sponsor the events.

GK: How did the sponsorship for the Molokai-Oahu canoe race come about?

DY: Racing committee officials, specifically Mike Tongg as well as Hannie Anderson, knew I was at Bank of Hawaii. They approached me because at that point in time, the race was in danger of being dropped. They needed some money. They knew I'd be sympathetic.

GK: Tell me about the slack key concert?

DY: I had done the Huli Kakou concerts and helped Peter Moon with his Kanikapila concerts, so I was always involved in helping. Milton Holt didn't have the money for the slack key concert, so I managed to come up with the funds for BankoH to sponsor the slack key concert. It was held at the McCoy Pavilion. I guess it was all a part of the Hawaiian Renaissance. . . Eventually, we got to the point where we were able to get both events televised.

