

## BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY DONNA MERCADO KIM

Senator Donna Mercado Kim is the daughter of Andrew Kim and Lily Mercado Kim. Her maternal grandparents, Juan Mercado (originally from Batangas in the Philippines and died months after she was born) and Mary Carvalho Mercado Atienza whose parents migrated from the Azores, Portugal to Ka‘ū, Hawai‘i. She had 10 children, two of whom died very young. Her paternal grandparents were less known to her. She believes her paternal grandfather’s name was Kim Kaang Yun and her paternal grandmother, Annie Poo Kun, was a picture bride whose first husband died very young. Kun remarried Ernest Gilbert of Pennsylvania.

The middle child in a family of five children, Senator Kim attended Likelike Elementary School, Kalākaua Intermediate School and Farrington High School. She began her college education at University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa and completed her degree at Washington State University, majoring in Recreation with a hope of returning to Palama Settlement as Recreation Director. However, she took a career detour when she was mentored by developer Bob Allen, who encouraged her to start a modeling agency which became Models of the Century Modeling School.

Senator Kim describes her political career as accidental. In 1982, she was listening to the news about classmates she knew who were legislators and she thought if they could do, why can she. So with no experience campaigning or in politics, she contacted a Farrington classmate who guided her and won by 29 votes. In 1985 she ran for City Council and in 2000 she earned a seat in the State Senate, where she continues to serve.

Senator Kim grew up a block from Palama Settlement, on Lakimela Lane. As a child, she spent nearly every day at Palama taking advantage of all the activities Palama had to offer from swimming, playing badminton and volleyball, to drama, cooking and arts and craft classes, as well as canteen dances. She spent her summer at Palama’s summer fun programs and camping at Palama Uka Camp on the North Shore. She also learned to play pool and chess in the Game Room and formed a Palama social club called the Ribbonettes.

Senator Kim is the mother of a son, Micah Po’okela Kim Aiu.



Senator Donna Mercado Kim

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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW  
with  
Senator Donna Mercado Kim (DK)  
May 9th, 2023  
Palama Settlement, Honolulu  
Interviewed by Paula Rath (PR)

- PR: Paula Rath is interviewing Senator Donna Mercado Kim for “Reflections of Palama Settlement II” on May 9th at Palama Settlement. Donna, where were you born?
- DK: I was born just about a block away from Palama Settlement. If you turn left on Pālama Street from Vineyard, the first street on the right is Lakimela Lane and that's where I lived. It's a one way street. In order to get through it, you have to go around on to King Street and come up, I believe, Peterson Lane, which leads into Lakimela Lane. That's why I was so close to Palama and this is where I came all the time.
- PR: What's your father's name?
- DK: My father's name is Andrew Kim, and he lived right near Palama as well. He was a boxer in his younger age. His brother also was a boxer. He was kind of more well known than my father. He was known as Wildcat Kim, but he died at an early age. My dad also was a woodcarver and he carved tikis---wooden tikis by hand. My other uncle had a surfboard rack in Waikīkī on the beach in front of Royal Hawaiian Hotel. My dad would sit there and carve these tikis and all the tourists would come and watch him and offer him money for the tikis. I love woodworking and I think that's where I get my woodworking skills from. (Laughs) I also get my fighting skills from him because people always say that I fight for my community and I think it comes from that fighting spirit that my father. . .
- PR: Well, we're glad you inherited that.
- DK: Well, growing up in Kalihi and in Palama, you got to have---you got to be a fighter because, you know, in order to survive. We were poor and I was a middle child, so I had to fight for everything in the family and school and so forth. So, yeah.
- PR: What's your mother's name?
- DK: My mother's name is Lilly. Lilly Mercado Kim. My mom's father, Juan Ricardo, died when my mom was born---shortly after my mom was born. So she was the youngest of that marriage. She had like three or four siblings above her. Then my grandmother remarried her father's best friend, Bartolomé Atienza, and then they had about four other children. So my grandmother had about ten kids and two of them died at a young age. So it was a large family.
- PR: And how many siblings do you have?
- DK: I have four siblings. I have an older brother and older sister and two younger sisters. So being the middle child in the family always---again, you know, had to fight for---I was either too young to know I should know better and I should respect the elders, or I was old enough that I [was] supposed to be taking care of my younger sisters and stuff. So I

was always in that middle area that---yeah. And because we didn't have a lot, I had a lot of hand-me-downs. So my sister above me---so my mom would dress us in similar kinds of clothes but we only had a few dresses each year and we just had to wear them all year long. At Easter time we would get a treat and we would get a new Easter dress. But other than that, yeah, I had hand-me-downs.

PR: Do you have children?

DK: I do. I have one child. I have one son and he's my gift---gift from God, I call it. He's just been a joy in my life. I didn't think I wanted children. I used to feel that it wasn't fair that women had to go through labor and all the pain and giving birth to children and I just thought it wasn't fair growing up. And yeah, I never thought I wanted children. So I had him pretty late in life and luckily I did because I didn't realize that I had a void in my life until I had him. Because I was older and I'd done a lot and accomplished a lot, I really spent a lot of time making sure, even though I was in politics, even though I was on the City Council, I really made sure I made time to be at all of his games and in school and just pay attention to him. When I was working, my parents took care of him and so he really got to know his grandparents. So I feel really blessed.

PR: Yes, I had a similar situation. It just---it means so much. What is his name?

DK: His name is Micah. Micah Po'okela Kim Aiu. I wanted to make sure that the Kim name was in part of his name.

PR: Wonderful. Do you know much about your maternal ancestors?

DK: Yes. My great grandparents on my mom's side came from Portugal. The Azores island. They landed on the Big island. Had a dairy, I believe, in the Kula or Puna area. So my grandmother as a child grew up there and then they moved to Honolulu and then that's where they resided after that and my mom and all the kids were born pretty much at the Lakimela Lane. So they grew up there and I grew up there. So it was a family. My uncles lived downstairs of us. We lived upstairs. It was the three-building tenement housing and there were four units, two in the bottom, two on the top in each of the buildings. So we lived in the front building on top, my uncle below us, and then in the back, the second house, my grandparents lived in the back on the ground floor. My auntie would come. She used to live at Buckle Lane by Liliha, it's no longer there---by Pua Lane. She would bring the kids and---that whole area, it was really more of a Japanese camp area.

There were a lot of Japanese families around us and so as a result I ended up with my older sister going to Japanese school at Palama Gakuen, which is just a little ways away from Palama Settlement, and I hated it. I quit at third grade and my parents let me quit. I wish they didn't. Because if they didn't let me quit, I'd probably be able to speak Japanese today. My sister was more diligent and so she ended up graduating from Palama Gakuen. Only person at that time to graduate without any Japanese ancestry and so she can speak Japanese. She also ended up taking Okinawan dance, and so she was more into the Japanese culture, Okinawan culture. I ended up in the Hawaiian culture. I ended up taking hula at Palama Settlement. I remember I was about six years old and right in this room next to where we're at right now, where we had our hula lessons. That's where I

started my hula and then continued on with Auntie Ma'iki and ended up dancing professionally for Ed Kenney at the Hilton Hawaiian Village Tapa Room. But it all started because of Palama.

PR: Oh my goodness. Yeah. Auntie Ma'iki.

DK: Auntie Ma'iki. Yes.

PR: How about your paternal grandparents? Do you have knowledge of them?

DK: Not as good as my mom's side. But yes, they lived right in back of Palama on the side street where the union hall is now. My grandmother was a picture bride, came from Korea. Her name was Annie Puu Kun, and she married my grandfather---I can't pronounce my grandfather's name. Of course, you know, they always say the surname first. Kim something Yoon. He died at an early age and she ended up remarrying. She had four children---or three---boys from the first marriage and then a second marriage. She married a caucasian, Gilbert and had two children from him. So my mom lived with them when they first got married so she learned to cook Korean. So my mom was a great cook. She cooked Korean, she cooked Portuguese, she could cook all kinds of foods. So everybody would come to the house and she would cook for them. My mom met my dad at Palama pool, and then they ended up getting married.

So, yeah, our whole family kind of came out of Palama and I guess that's how I ended up coming to Palama at a really young age because my older sister swam with coach Mamizuka. She ended up marrying one of the swimmers that swam with her, went to McKinley. My brother, his girlfriend used to come here and he ended up marrying Ku'u lei. They were part of---I remember she and her sister was a part of the Palama Summer Fun, Summer Day Fun. They were counselors. As I got older, I ended up being a junior leader in summer fun because it was such a good time, enjoyed it so much, I didn't want it to end as I got older. So I wanted to continue and be a counselor because I had such good guidance and good mentorship from a lot of the staff here at Palama, a lot of the people that worked here. That was kind of my goal. I went to school thinking I wanted to be a recreation director and come back to Palama and work here at Palama Settlement with all the kids and underprivileged kids.

PR: You're welcome back any time, Donna.

DK: Thank you.

PR: So it sounds to me like your ethnicities is plural in a big way. What are---what created you? (Laughs).

DK: Well, my as I said, my grandmother came from---family came from Portugal, but also her mother, I believe, or great grandmother, also came from Poland. So there's Polish. We have Polish, Portuguese. Then she married Filipino and so my mom has Filipino. In fact, my mom was Miss Hawai'i Filipino 1947, something like that. I have pictures of her with other Filipino gowns and stuff. Then my dad is pure Korean. So I'm half Korean and the rest is Portuguese, Spanish, Filipino, Polish.

PR: Hawai'i kind (laughter).

DK: Yes, we're all mixed up. So my siblings, we all look different. My older sister kind of pulls more on a fair oriental side. And then my brother looks like Caucasian, mixed, like hapa. And then me and then my sister below me is very Korean looking and then my sister below is very fair and very Portuguese looking like more like my mom. And when they used to go places, my mom would be holding my sister who looked really Korean and my dad will hold his hand my sister looked very fair and people would kind of stop and stare back in those days because of the contrast. But yeah, we all kind of put a different portion of that mixture.

PR: How interesting. Can you talk a little bit about your neighbors?

DK: Yes. As I said earlier, we sort of lived in a Japanese camp. There were Japanese people all around us. I remember coming home, "Tadaima!" and "go bocha," and, you know, we had a lot of Japanese words in our vocabulary. But one of the neighbors right next door to our three building tenement housing and there was a fence and if you're looking at the house it's on the right hand side---was the Kawakami family. Nelson Kawakami who was our swimming instructor here at Palama Settlement. I remember he had these bamboo poles and on high tide, of course, because we used to have low tide, but on high tide, he'd put the bamboo and you hang on to the bamboo, and then the long way cross the pool and you'd have to kick, kick, kick, hanging on to the bamboo and he'd be dragging you along the way. On Saturday nights they would drain Palama pool. I don't think they do that anymore, but they would drain the pool. On Sunday people would come down and they'd clean the pool. They brushed the pool down and cleaned the pool and everything. Then low tide, they put low tide in, and they put these wooden ladders. I remember we had these little foot water things where you have to step in it to clean your feet before you get into the pool. We had the cleanest pool. Palama had the cleanest pool because I remember swimming at Farrington pool. Touching the bottom was slimy.

PR: Ew (laughs).

DK: Yes, it was slimy. And I used to think, Oh, my God. So Palama had the cleanest pool. So we climbed down the ladder, and then we put our hands down and we'd be kicking and the low tide and the pool kind of angled down. So the part where it was deeper, of course, had more water and then, of course, as you go up, really little water. Then that night they would fill up the pool and so from Tuesday---and the water was always so clean and just so good. We had two diving boards, the high board and the low board and I think you still might have that. We would dive off the board. But one of the favorite things we had was 'cut corners'. We'd play cut corners. Chase master, we're not supposed to play chase master, but we did. We did it, you know, very diligently and quietly. But you'd have to go---and you couldn't go around the corner and so in order to get across, you'd have to dive in the corner and come back up and then run down and then dive in the pool, come back up. So we had cut corners chase master at the pool (laughs). Those are some of my fondest memories. I was so dark because I was swimming almost every day. When we went to Los Angeles for the first time, my mom was worried. She said, "You look so dark, they're going to mistake you for being part black."

PR: Well, about how old were you when you were spending so much time on Palama Settlement's campus?

DK: Got to be from at least five or six years old because I started taking hula at six years old. So I think I tagged along with my sister and they would do their thing and leave me in this main building where you had the pool room, the game room. So I would shoot pool and then some of the counselors would sit with me and teach me how to play chess. I would walk upstairs, I would go to the arts and crafts room. I can't remember her name. She was so good, but she would make these jade pieces and we do all kinds of craft products. We had a cooking class. I remember downstairs, there was a little kitchen, and so we'd have cooking classes. There would be drama classes, there was a little auditorium, and so we would have drama classes and lip synching. I remember lip synching to "Lipstick on Your Collar."

So just everything, I just did everything. I remember it was---I think it was 10 cents a day to be a member at Palama, you had to be a member. But it was \$2 for the whole year. So I would get a whole year pass, a \$2 pass. For summer fun and for Palama Uka Camp, of course it would cost a lot more. I think it was like \$60 for the summer fun camp and it was five days a week and they fed you lunch, but we couldn't afford it. So I would sell--- they would have Portuguese sausage, sweet bread sales. They would, you know, I'd sign up, I'd get it, give it to my dad. He'd go to work, he'd sell it at---he was a carpenter, so he'd sell it at his job. That's how I was able to go to camp and I was able to go to Palama Uka because of all of that fundraising. But I remember the blue membership card that I had in my wallet. I knew everybody on the staff and they all knew me because I was there almost every single day.

Palama also---it wasn't, I don't think it was Palama, but there was a music school. There was a separate little building just on the right hand side. Before they moved this building over. There was kind of recessed in and it was the music school and they had piano and piano classes. I loved to play piano. I wanted to learn. Course we couldn't afford it. But I found out that they had these practice rooms upstairs and you could sign up for a key to practice. I guess they didn't know who all their students were. So I would go in, sign my name, get the keys, go upstairs, open the door, get in there and I'd try to teach myself. They had windows and you could see the pool from there, the Palama pool and see who was around. But I would always do that. So I was here all the time and this was kind of my home away from home. If not for Palama, I don't know where I'd be. I'd be at home. There was no YMCA nearby and I had to walk to everything or catch the bus. There were no bus that ran down Vineyard back then. It was basically King Street, School Street. So in order to get to any place you want to go, we had to walk. So, yeah, Palama was just so convenient and just had everything and it was always open and the game room was always open. There was always somebody there. Always.

PR: So, Palama, is your real education, of course.

DK: Yes.

PR: How about your other education? Where did you go to elementary school?

DK: Oh that? I went to Likelike School, which is right across from Palama Settlement.

PR: Literally across the street.

DK: Literally across the street from Palama Settlement. Back in those days, they had swimming lessons. I think when we got to fifth grade, they would walk the class over with our towels and stuff, and we'd actually have a swimming class. I felt like I was special in the sense that I knew how to swim. I'd been swimming since I was so little and some of the kids couldn't swim. There was this bully and he didn't know how to swim. He would always bully us. I remember saying, "Okay, you know, I'll meet you at Palama pool. I'll fight you at Palama pool," (laughs) because I knew he couldn't swim. But then I went to Likelike School, and then from there I went to Kalākaua. Now, Palama Street was the district line, because if you lived on the east side of Palama Street, then you went to Central and you went to McKinley. If you lived on the right side, on the west side of Palama Street, then you went to Farrington and Kalākaua. So I ended up at Kalākaua School and Farrington High School.

PR: And how about college?

DK: I went to UH for my first two years, my freshman and sophomore year. I didn't really know if I wanted to go to college when I was at Farrington and, you know, my parents didn't graduate from high school, and so there was nobody there to really encourage me what it is I could get into. I didn't know what I wanted to do other than I wanted to work at Palama at some point. So I, like everybody else, just applied. That was part of, I think, our class, our guidance class to fill out applications. So I applied to UH and got accepted. I was really kind of worried because I wasn't a really academic student. But things came pretty easy and so I didn't really study a lot. So I looked and I thought, Oh my God, I didn't really study a lot. I don't know if I know enough to go to college. Because I never was exposed to it. I didn't have anybody mentoring me about that.

But I ended up at UH and thought, This is just like being in high school, you know, you got to cram, you got to study for the test, you pass. But I used to watch a lot of TV and a lot of old movies, and I would see these college campuses and, you know, they live in the dorms. And I thought, Oh, one day I want to live in a dorm. I want to go to school and live in the dorm and have a college life. Because here at UH, you just drive home and go back. And, yeah, I joined a sorority there, but it wasn't like the movies. So my goal was to go away to school. So in my sophomore year at UH, I ended up landing the job of a hula dancer with Ed Kenney show through Auntie Ma'iki. There was a call, cattle call, and Ed was having the show, his girl quit on him, or she was getting married. So two weeks before the show was going to debut, he needed a girl to fill in, and so he auditioned everybody, ended up with me at the end. I fit in all of her clothes and her shoes and everything because they did a little missionary scene in one of the dances in the story.

So I was dancing at Hilton Hawaiian Village Tapa Room, and there was a priest that would come to all of the shows. It was really unusual to see a clergyman in the show. It was Monsignor Kekumano. He watched me and he tells me, this is later, that he saw, you know, of course, two weeks I had to learn everything and he watched me develop and so he would talk to me and say, "Well, what do you want to be?" And I said, "Well, I don't

want to be a hula dancer my whole life. Hula dancers are a dime a dozen," I said, "I really want to go away to school." And so he said, "Well, if you need a scholarship, the Hawaiian Civic Club." So I said, Okay. So I thought about it and I ended up applying to schools, and tried to apply for the Hawaiian Civic Club, but I wasn't Hawaiian. He thought I was part Hawaiian, it was the only nationality I didn't have was Hawaiian. But I went through the library and I look through all the books, and there was a big book of different scholarships.

So I ended up applying for the Duke Kahanamoku Scholarship and the Pi'ilani Bishop, and the Duke Kahanamoku Scholarship was \$1,000 a year, which was a lot of money. Well it turned out Monsignor Kekumano and Gladys Brandt was on the board selecting the scholarship winners (laughs). So I ended up getting the Duke Kahanamoku Scholarship for two years and the Pi'ilani Bishop was, I think like \$500. And [I] chose to go to Washington State University. I wanted to go to a college campus. I wanted to go to where the kids lived on campus. I also wanted to go somewhere where I didn't know anybody. I had friends who was at Boulder, in Colorado, and I thought about that, but I thought, you know what? I want to see if I can make it on my own. I want the experience of going away and not being homesick like my boyfriend, who had gone away to school and they just played Hawaiian music and the Hawaiian kids got together and they were just homesick together. I thought, well, why are you going to go away if you just you're going to just long to be at home? I said, I know Hawai'i will always be my home and that I may not have this experience again in my life. So I have to make the best of it. I was homesick to some degree, but I joined a sorority because I realized you need a nucleus, you need a support group in order to succeed. You just can't---you can do it on your own in some ways, but you still need some kind of support. And I did, I joined a sorority and I ended up graduating from Washington State---cum laude graduate.

PR: Oh, wow.

DK: Yeah. It was another experience and the best times of my life as well. I made some really good friends there.

PR: You figured out how to be a student very quickly.

DK: Yeah, and my parents couldn't afford to send me away. They had two younger children at home and my mom was a waitress and my dad, carpenter. So I had to work. I worked at The Cool, this little hamburger place, not far from the sorority house. I got my scholarships and yeah, in summer I would come home and I'd work as a cocktail waitress so that I would be able to have enough money to pay my tuition at Washington.

PR: And what was your major?

DK: I majored in recreation. Yeah, true to myself, I wanted to come back and work with kids because they had such an impact on me that that's what I wanted to spend my life doing.

PR: So after college, what was your first job?

DK: My first job was at Barbers Point, and it was a recreation director for the families of the military men and women that was at Barbers Point. So I would schedule all kinds of

activities for the dependents and scheduling courts for the soldiers and so forth. I remember working with Colonel Cailus, and I would drive out every day all the way to Barbers Point and then come home. I remember driving home and being really tired and falling asleep at the wheel because it was such a long drive. But yeah, that was my only job as a recreation in my degree. From then on, I ended up in sales and in the hotels and airlines and just did a lot of different things because I felt that I really wanted experience. I really didn't know other than thinking that I wanted to just work at Palama, what it is that I really wanted to do.

PR: You mentioned a modeling business. You managed a modeling business.

DK: I actually started it from scratch. So I was working---it's kind of a long story, but I was working at Motorola Communications. I had applied with a firm, kind of a job seeking firm and it was a kind of a top firm. I'm not even sure how that came about, but they called me and said, "We have a position at Motorola Communications. A salesperson selling two-way radio." And I didn't know anything about two-way radios. Back then, you got to remember, this was in the seventies. So I went for the interview. They hired me. I was the first woman salesperson at Motorola Communications. It was in Mapunapuna that they hired and I ended up doing all the military accounts. Federal government and military accounts. I actually did quite well. I was salesperson of a quarter or one of the quarters. But something I told myself, you know, in order to get a really good paying, high paying job, you have to know people, you have to have connections. I don't know why I knew that, I just felt that. So I looked to the newspaper for jobs and I ended up seeing this one ad and it said, and I remember this, "Fun loving, wealthy couple looking for model-type hostess. \$1,000 a month, a condo and a car." And I said, Oh, that's kind of interesting. And I said, If I didn't know any better, It sounds like they're looking for a high class hooker (laughs). But I said, You never know until you go out and try for it and if they are, then you'll turn it down, right?

So I called up for an interview and they said, Okay. And it was set for Sunday afternoon at Century Center in Waikīkī, right at the beginning of---and the building was just getting completed. So I drive there on a Sunday afternoon and I turn in and the building, still have some construction going on, and I'm getting really skeptical about this whole thing, right? So I pull in and he was in the side office and luckily he had his girlfriend with him. Big haole man. He had this little Filipino girlfriend, Carmen Cardona. They interviewed me and they were looking for a receptionist in their penthouse because they were going to move into the penthouse at Century Center and they wanted to have a receptionist because he did a lot of developing and people would come. He wanted two, one that would take the day shift and the other would take the early evening shift. I would have a studio unit because he had these club studio units stacked on top of each other with one door. You go in and you go down and you have a door too, and its upstairs, you had a door. So I had the one down, so I had the studio unit facing Kalākaua Avenue and I had an RX. They gave me an RX-7, [drove] a red RX-7 car, and I got \$1,000 a month. That was a lot back then.

I remember going to my boss at Motorola, Richard, and I said, "Richard, I'm going to quit." And he goes, "Why? You're doing so good at Motorola." And I said, "I know, but I have this opportunity to work for this developer, Bob Allen, and he developed Century

Center, he's going to do several more buildings." And he goes, "But that sounds like a dead end." He says, "What is that going to lead to, you know, like advancement?" I said, "No, you're right." But I really believe it's the people that you meet and if I make the right connections then---how do they know that unless I'm you know, they see me and work with me? And he goes, Well, I said, "Richard, if it doesn't work out, would you hire me back?" He goes, "Absolutely." I said, "Then what do I have to lose?" (Laughter) So I took the job and I actually did some traveling with them. Carmen was a dancer and so I'd go to dance classes with her sometimes.

So he was planning the building Century Square, which is right as you come onto Bishop Street by the church. Then he also did Executive Centre, which he did a whole block. So I learned a lot from him. He told me this, he says, "Donna, a lot of people feel that in order to win, somebody has to lose." He goes, "You grow up playing sports, somebody wins, somebody loses." He goes, "But you know what? We can all win." He says, "It's possible that we can all win." And so I always remember that, what he told me. But as he was designing the building Century Square, I was teaching part time Barbizon modeling because I had been recruited for an ad. I was homecoming queen at University of Hawai'i. I don't normally talk about that, so I had done some modeling and so I was teaching Barbizon School.

So one day Bob sits me down he goes, "Donna, I'm thinking of building a dance school on the top floor of Century Square." And he said, "I think a dancer should be a model and a model should be a dancer." He said, "What do you think about a modeling school and a dance school? What do you think about that concept?" And I said, "Great." And he goes, "Well, I don't know anything about what I would need for a modeling school." So, you know, so he picked my brain.

I said, "Well, you know, you need at least two rooms for makeup room. Then you need a little ramp room and then photography." So I gave him and he would lay it all out and then the dance school. Then when they started construction, were going to start construction, they had a model unit on the site at Century Square. They picked up the model unit and they moved it where KC Drive-Inn was at the time because he was going to do something on that lot. So he put it there.

So he calls me in one day and he says, "Donna, what do you think about starting the modeling school before the building is even complete? So when the building is complete, we'd already have the business going on and we'd just move over." And I said, "Great." He said we can redo the model unit and it had just enough rooms, exactly what we needed. He said, "You would run the modeling school here." And I said, "Okay." And he says, "You would be the director of the school and I would pay you and then you would do everything. You would do the curriculum, you would hire everybody, you'd do all of that." And then of course, he had a couple of people that could assist me in some ways. He said, "But basically, you'd be running it, you'd be the boss." And I said, "Great." He goes, "But you're going to have to give up this job as my receptionist, and you have to give up your studio unit and you have to give up the car."

And I---mmm---but I knew it was an opportunity and so I said, "Yes, I'll do it." I ended up hiring one of my sorority sisters and together we wrote the curriculum, we did the

commercials, I got the jingle, my cousin is Malani Bilyeu from Kalapana and he wrote the jingle for me. We took a trip to New York, I did all of the buying for the makeup and from there, we took a side trip to Washington, DC, I had never been to Washington, DC. I was just in awe at the monuments and Lincoln and I ended up buying a T-shirt that said a woman's place is in the House and the Senate and little did I know that was going to be an omen, that I would one day be in the House and the Senate. But that kind of segued me into that. But that's how I got involved with the modeling school.

PR: What was it called?

DK: Models of the Century and Bob came up with the name.

PR: I remember!

DK: Yeah, Bob came up with the name because we're thinking of names and, you know, Century Center. So it was Century Square. So he had this whole thing with centuries. So then he goes, "How about models [pounds table] like a stamp of the century, you know, models of the century?" I go, "Yeah, that sounds kind of neat." So that's what we did. We had these foil cards that said 'Models of the Century' and the jingle and everything. So I learned so much about small business, how to run a business. I didn't know that in order to be in the yellow pages of the phonebook, you had to pay every month. I said, "The book comes out once a year. How come I have to pay every month?" I didn't realize that phones for businesses cost more than a landline at home.

But when the alarm went off in the middle of the night, I also learned that, you know what, I had to get up. I had to because it was me, you know? So it's great to be your own boss, but it's also you have all this responsibility. When a teacher called in sick, I had to fill in and teach. And I love teaching. I love teaching the girls, it just warmed my heart to be in classes with them. But just creating the curriculum---and so it was a very virtual-type curriculum I created where when they learned etiquette, we took them out to a fancy dinner. And just so happened Century Center had a very nice restaurant on the second floor. So we arranged for them and so we'd bring---we usually had ten girls in a class, ten kids. So we'd come out that night and they'd have the show plates and we'd have this full on dinner. It was part of their fees that they paid for, it was embedded in the costs, but we took them out. They had to dress up nicely and they learned about, you know, show plates and what forks to use, and we'd have a flaming dessert and everything and they just loved it. You know, instead of just learning about that. Then I had every girl do a photoshoot, even though they weren't model potential. Because most of the kids weren't model potential, they're more for self-improvement, but we had them all do photo shoots and did their makeup and then we did color capes and we would sit in partners and they put the color keeps on to see what their---if they're a winter or summer type of complexion. But it was a really a hands on type of thing. It was so rewarding that I just loved it. So when I decided to run for office, I had to get---I gave it all up.

PR: Why did you decide to run for office and how did this come about?

DK: It seems like my life has been accidents along the way, it was never intentional. I'm driving home, literally driving home, I remember, on the freeway, from Models of the

Century and I'm listening to the news and they start talking about Milton Holt, Senator Milton Holt. I knew Milton. He had gone to Kamehameha School. His brother had gone to Farrington. We were sort of friends. Then Chip Awani, who was a Farrington graduate, and he was in the House of Representatives. I'm thinking, You know what? If they can do this, why can't I? I think I'm probably smarter than them. And so, yeah, so that bothered me. So the next day I go back to the school and, you know, I'd hired all my teachers. I had wonderful teachers, by the way. They weren't really model types because models don't really have that kind of compassion for self-improvement and kids, you know, they're more into themselves. But these women were attractive, yet they were very compassionate and they enjoyed working with the kids.

But anyway, I talked to them and I said, "Hey, guys, if I ran for office, would you help me?" And they go, "Yeah, sure." I didn't know a thing. I'd never stepped foot in City Hall, never stepped foot at the State Capitol, never helped anybody run for office. I wasn't an intern. I didn't even know I could be an intern back then. But I had this thing, when I made up my mind for something, that I was going to pursue it. So I immediately called a friend of mine who I had gone to school with in high school, and he was working for Tom Nakoda, City Councilman Tom Nakoda at the time. So I called him up. He says, "Hey, (??)." And I said, "Hey, I'm thinking about running for office." He goes, "Oh, okay." I said, "Can we meet for lunch or can we get together?" He goes, "Yeah." So he meets with me and he says, "You know, it's kind of late because this is June already and the deadline, though, is July 20th, something like that." He goes, "Not too late. But you should have started a year ago planning all of this."

Well, and then I was scheduled to be the chaperone for Junior Miss because as Models of the Century we used to train a lot of the girls and so I was involved in the Junior Miss program. So was the chaperone to Mobile, Alabama, right in July. So he hooked me up with a friend, Mel Morishige, he hooked me up with Mel and Mel knew all about campaigning and he talked Mel into helping me. Mel didn't want to help me, but he told Mel he goes, "Hey, she runs a modeling school. You're going to meet all these models, good looking models." And he goes, "Okay." (Laughter) So that's how I ended up getting Mel. And because I didn't know anything, Mel said, "Okay, we're going to work backwards. We're going to have a calendar, and the last two weeks you're going to do this and you're going to hold signs you can walk through it," I said, "I'm not holding signs." I said, "I'm not holding signs. I never wave at anybody on the street. I'm not holding signs." He said, "Well if you want to win, you got a hold signs." I said, "Okay. I guess I'm holding signs." (Laughter) I didn't know anything. He goes, "You mail, you know, you're going to three brochures, you're going to mail one here," and so because I didn't know anything, I listened. I did what he told me to do and I just followed what he did, what he said. I ended up winning by 29 votes.

But one of the reputations I ended up having was that, Oh, Donna Mercado Kim has all these models holding signs for her because I had a few of them and they were standing on the corners and they were attractive and some of them were in the shorts and so guys would drive by---they tell me this to this day, "I remember you holding signs over there and I remember thinking, you know, and you had all these girls," and I really didn't have that many. But you know how a myth starts and people think, "Oh my God, she has all

these models holding signs for her." They'd see a few and like, yeah, she has all these models and so people would come and help us and stuff. I had a---one of my teachers, I put a lei on her and I put on a corner---and my sister-in-law put a lei on her and put [unclear] and nobody knew what I looked like. Because I was in Mobile, Alabama. We had the signs made, it says, 'Donna Kim' and so people, they were holding signs before they even saw me.

Then I started going door to door and they go, "Oh, you're Donna Mercado Kim. "Oh, mom, Donna Mercado Kim in person," you know, and they said, "Oh, you're Donna Mercado Kim." But they really didn't know what I looked like and so they would see my sister like she kind of, from far, looks like me. And they thought that, Oh wait a minute, then they see---one of my friends, they thought that was me. And so, you know, I was all over the place (laughter).

PR: Clones (laughs).

DK: But I only won by 29 votes. 29 votes. Had 15 people voted differently. I would not be where I am today. My whole life trajectory would have been different. Again, you know, I felt like I wanted to say. There were things in my neighborhood---at the time I was living in Salt Lake. It was overbuilt. There wasn't enough parking. People at night would come home, couldn't find parking, we'd park around the corners. It was very dangerous and I said, Something needs to be done. But then I found out when I got into the House that as a State Rep, I couldn't do anything about those things, it was those people on the City Council, so I needed to get to the City Council. Then I ended up getting on the City Council. I ended up running against Charlie Campbell. Charlie Campbell was a teacher at Farrington High School. My sister had him as a teacher. The time I decided to run, they went from multi-member districts to single member district.

As a result, he was a Senator with Dickie Wong. Dickie Wong had a four year term. His term was coming up, so he decided he was going to run for the House, which is the seat I ended up running from. He didn't have a lot of money but as a multi-member district, people would always vote for their favorite candidate and then for someone else. So, of course, he was the minority and he was black and so they would give him a second vote. So he ended always getting---so he didn't really campaign that hard. So luckily, I won. I only had two endorsements. One was from the Carpenters Union because my dad was a carpenter and one was from one of the construction---SILO, legislative management, and those were the only two. And to this day, I always remember them. I always remember who it was that supported me from the beginning because nobody thought I could win. They labeled me as a model, "Oh, she's just a model." I said, "Well, you don't just say that---" because Arnold Morgado won at the same time I did and I said, "You don't just say he's just a football player, but you just tell me I'm just a model. I'm not a model. I'm the executive director of a modeling agency. It's a business that I have to run."

But that's the kind of labels that we got. I didn't know any better. I worked really hard. I would be in high heels going door to door and my campaign would tell me, "You gotta not dress so nicely and you got to pull your hair back because you go to the door and the housewife opens the door and she's been cooking all day and cleaning and everything, and she sees you at the door, she's not going to vote for you." And I go, "Well, maybe the

husband will." (Laughter) But I didn't---I said, "I'm not going to change myself." I said, "I'm not going to change who I am." I said, "Because I don't want to change myself and then when I get in, that's not who it is. So I have to be me. I have to be who I am." And so, you know, I did that. I ended up ruining my back because I would hold signs with high heels and stuff and get bunions on my feet. I remember on the day of the election, the polls opened at 7 AM and there was---Salt Lake with all the high rises and so there was the one precinct that all the high rise people went to, and you couldn't get to the high rises other than mailing. Of course you could only mail---I only raised \$5,000. That's it. And I spent my \$5,000. So I couldn't really get to all the buildings. So I stood at that one corner right where they would drive by to get to the polling place. Salt Lake Elementary School.

PR: Which campaign was this for?

DK: My very first campaign in 1982 for the House of Representatives. St. Philomena Church, I'm a Catholic. I was baptized at St. Teresa and took my first Holy Communion at St. Teresa, so my parish ended up being St. Philomena. So I remember going, just before I went to stand in the corner, I went in and I lit a candle and I prayed to God and I said, "Lord, if this is my calling, if this is something that you think that I should be doing. Then you will see that I will win. If this is not my calling and you have something else for me, then I won't win." And so that night I was losing all night. All night, I was losing until the last print out. Back then, the stations closed down. We had to drive to the Capitol and sit in the cold auditorium and wait to see the final print out and see if my name was on top. When I won by 29, I went to church and my brother and sister in-law went with me to church and prayed and I said, "Lord, you gave me the benefit of doubt. You wasn't quite sure that this is for me, but you gave me the benefit of the doubt and I have two years to show you that this is my calling."

And so as a result, I told Bob Allen, I said, "Bob, I need to quit and resign from Models of the Century." He says, "You know what?" He goes, "You are Models of the Century. I am willing to sell you the business, for literally almost nothing." You know, literally just give me the business. I thought about it and I said, "It's a very attractive offer," but I know how much work it takes to make---because you know, you had John Robert Powers, you had Barbizon. There was a lot of competition. And I said, "This is my first time being in office and if I really want to do what I should be doing, I need to really concentrate on being elected and serving the people. So I don't think I can do two jobs and do it well." And so I said, so, you know, "thank you, but no thank you." So he ended up not pursuing Models of the Century. He just closed it down. But that's the transition that I made and I made that commitment to the voters and I felt that it was my responsibility to uphold my commitment to them. So I did it pretty much full time. I did work as catering, in catering for Ala Moana Hotel during the off season, but yeah, pretty much been a full time legislator. I know we didn't get to Palama yet (laughs).

PR: Well, it sounds like religion played a very important role in your decision for your career. Did it overall in your life, has it played an important role?

DK: It has. I used to always feel---and it's so bad because lately I've been bad about it. But I used to feel like, if you couldn't give one hour of your time in the week to nourish your

soul, then something's wrong. Because we spent a lot of time nourishing our bodies and nourishing our mind, but we don't spend a lot of time nourishing our soul. I hate to say that because in the last so many years, I haven't really lived up to that. But I do believe in prayer, I do believe in affirmations and in visualization. I actually raised my son on that. But yeah, I think the church has had a great influence and being mentored by Monsignor Kekumano, it's also influenced me a lot. So, yes.

PR: So back to Palama.

DK: Yes. Back to Palama.

PR: When you were five or six, you started dancing here. Over the years, what else did you do? Palama has a lot to offer.

DK: Well, like I said, because I was here every single day, I took advantage of every single program Palama had, from arts and crafts to shooting pool to learning how to play chess. Chess is not something that somebody from a poor family would want to be interested in, one. And two, to learn. Because chess is a lot of---you have to know all the moves of every single piece on the board. Then you have to think two or three steps ahead and you have to learn all that. But I was intrigued by it. I don't know why, and I learned that and I think that's something that I don't know if I would do if I was older or not at Palama. But, you know, sports, I played in the gym a lot. Volleyball, badminton. My uncle and I was teamed up, doubles, badminton doubles, and we ended up winning the tournament. We were the champions, the badminton champions. I just wish that there were more mentors who mentored about aiming really, really high, like for the Olympics or going on---even in college, I didn't realize that I could have gone to law school because there was nobody really mentoring me into that. I kind of wish I had gone to law school. In fact, when I was on the City Council, I tried applying. I didn't try apply, I was going to apply, but they wouldn't let me because they didn't want to accept anybody who couldn't work full time. I said, "How can I work full time when I'm in the City Council and I have a child?"

And so I remember calling up Governor Waihe'e at the time, because he had done law part time and I said, "You know, Governor, UH's law school is really discriminatory against women." And he goes, "Why is that?" I said, "Because they're saying that in order for me to be accepted that I have to commit to doing it full time. Now think about mothers. How can a mother, especially single moms, how can they---?" And I was a single mom at the time, but---how can they improve themselves or get an education or become an attorney if they had to commit---I mean, they wouldn't have any income. Who would take care of the child? I said, "You know, you folks don't make it easy for women to get into law." So we were going to---I was going to challenge the school on that and then I decided it wasn't worth it. I remember my husband at the time, probably that's why he's not my husband anymore. But he says, "Why aren't you satisfied with what you have? Why do you have to keep reaching for more? Why do you want to go to law school?" And I said, "You know, the day I die, and then I'll stop." I said "But why? Why shouldn't I continue to improve myself? Why should I settle for just being, you know, what I have?" I said, "I've been in political office and I know the law and I've done that and I just think that I want to be a judge one day and in order to do that, I have to go to law school." But I ended up not because I would have needed his support to help take

care of my son and of course, my parents are willing to help. But, you know, it's a big commitment for law school at that time in my life. So I regret not doing that. But be as it may, my son is an attorney.

PR: Oh, okay. Well that's another way.

DK: Yeah. Yeah, that is another way. Anyway, getting back to all the things that I did here. So, you know, playing, playing sports, swimming and volleyball, sham battle. I remember sham battle in the gym.

PR: What is sham battle?

DK: Sham battle is---it's kind of like a dodgeball, but people have the balls and you're against the wall and they take the ball and they hit it hard and they try to hit you out and you're out. So you got to---you have to duck the balls and the person gotta---but it gets really dangerous cause some of these balls come at you. But yeah, that was sham battle that I knew of. Then of course the swimming, of course, all of the cooking classes, dance classes. Then we had a club, the Ribonnettes, I think it was called.

PR: What was that about?

DK: I don't know. I'm trying to think back about it. It was actually a social club, and some of us kids got together, the girls, and so we would have a canteen, a sleepover upstairs in the canteen room and have a dance and stuff. There were footsteps on the floor that was painted on the floor. I don't know what kind of dance step, but I remember we would see these dance feet on the floor back then. But yeah, and we just enjoyed ourselves. Then summer fun. I would, you know, during the summer, go to summer fun five days a week and then go to Palama Uka, camping, and then become a junior leader myself. So every aspect. Then I got to Farrington, that's when I stopped really coming to Palama on a regular basis because I was so engrossed in high school and I became a song leader and a sponsor and I was still dancing hula. I would catch the bus to Auntie Ma'iki, whose studio was on Ke'eumoku Street. So I'd go to class on the bus with my hula instruments once a week there. So my days were really full. Then my senior year, we moved from Waiakamilo to Kam IV Road, so it wasn't as easy for me to get to Palama Settlement. So that kind of was a time when I sort of weaned off, got weaned off Palama.

PR: Can you talk a little bit about a day in the life of Palama Uka? We haven't really had anyone talk about Palama Uka very much and it was a wonderful, wonderful time and place.

DK: It was. I remember---and some of the pictures there, but they had a big kind of a mess room---hall. Then they had where we would sleep and they were just wooden structures with canvas over it. I mean, that's kind of what we had and then they had bunk beds, as you can see from there. So we would sleep in there and they would get up in the morning, they'd wake you up with a kind of bell and we'd go into the mess hall and we'd have breakfast. Then from there there was either a hike or different kinds of classes going on. I remember archery. We had archery, you could, you know, do archery classes, you could do hiking. We had mud sliding, we had grass lighting. So there was a hill with all grass and we would have these cardboard boxes and we would sit in it and then we would slide

down the grass hills. But then, of course, mud sliding, we'd do with ti leaves, we had ti leaf mud sliding. Of course, as the picture showed, you know, soaked in mud, but it was just the time of our life. Then we'd have dinner and then we'd have campfire and we'd roast marshmallows. But at the campfire we did skits and we did songs, camp songs. One of the things I loved the most was 'Going on a Buta Hunt.' I don't know if you're familiar with that?

PR: No.

DK: I think it was King who did it. He was so good at it.

PR: King is Lorrin Gill.

DK: Lorrin Gill. So we'd sit around and we would be---a buta, in Japanese, is pig. So it was like, we're going on a pig hunt, right? But it was going on a buta hunt. And so we would [imitates] like we're walking, [claps rhythmically] "Going on a buta hunt," and we repeat, "going on a buta hunt, going on a buta hunt, going up the hill, going up, up, up, up the hill and back down the hill, going on about on buta hunt. Tall grass, tall grass. Okay, Got to go through the grass [motions with hands] Go through the grass, Go through the grass. Come out. Okay, going on a---Oh, here comes up water. We have to swim, swim across the water, swim across the water [makes swimming motions] Go across the water. And then, Oh, there's the buta! Oh my god! Turn around, she's chasing us, run, run, run. Oh, got a [unclear] okay, we got to go. We got to go to the grass. Go back to the grass. Okay, I'm---" I can't do it as well as he did it. But he would help us go through all of these different trails and then we would get to the buta, and then we had to go back, repeat back all the way through to get back to camp. But yeah, and then we would tell stories. They would tell the stories and stuff in the campfire. Then we'd go to sleep and the next day would start all over again. Yeah. Such a good time.

PR: Well, thank you for that.

DK: Yeah. And we had a camp song. Palama Uka Camp song, so we would sing that all the time in the big truck that they transported us in up to Palama. Yeah.

PR: And that was on the North Shore.

DK: Yeah, that was above Hale'iwa.

PR: Up mauka.

DK: Yes. It was just a wonderful, wonderful place. Too bad they don't have that anymore.

PR: Yes, I miss it terribly.

DK: And, you know, King---Lorrin Gill---and I didn't realize this at the time, but he was an environmentalist. He did expose us to nature and to taking care of the 'āina and appreciate 'āina. In Nu'uanu we went up, they called it Luakaha and we would go there for the day and we'd go swimming and we'd pick ginger and bamboos and stuff like that. Christmas time, we'd pick all the greens and they'd come back to Palama and have Hanging of the Green. They would decorate the building all in greens and they would

have an evening with loudspeakers and they would blast Christmas songs and all the families would come down to Palama and there would be some refreshments and they would sing carols and sing songs and it was called Hanging of the Greens. That was a big deal for all of the families. Palama just brought everybody together. Because we had Mayor Wright Housing on one side and so you had all of those families and then you had the rest of us and we were just, you know, I don't think we were even middle class. We were below middle class back then, but we didn't even realize that. You don't realize we were poor. Palama was the glue. Yeah.

PR: What are your hopes for Palama's future? You're a visionary person.

DK: So, you know. Well, but I'm also nostalgic, and I would love to see Palama back to the way it was, because, you know, I have such great, grand memories, and it meant so much to me. It was a place that I could always come. I didn't have to think about---other than Sundays when they were closed. That was the saddest day because Palama was closed. So I couldn't come to Palama. But I could---you know, there was free swim almost all the time. There was free swim except for late in the afternoons when the swim team would practice. Of course, then we couldn't swim. But it was free swim most of the time. The game room was always open. You could always go in there and play cards or shoot pool or play chess and there's always somebody there. Chinese checkers, we get Chinese checkers.

Then there was a schedule of the arts and crafts room, which was, you know, five days a week. Arts and crafts, go up there whenever I felt like it. There was always some kind of craft project we could do. Then they had scheduled cooking classes and they had drama classes, so there was always something to do. If I couldn't think of anything to do, then I could always go borrow the key and go up to the piano room and play on the piano or go to the gym and pick up a game with whoever was around there. So there was always, always something to do. I just needed a place to feel safe and a place that I could go---and away from home. Because at home was only chores and babysitting. There wasn't a lot more. My mom worked the nights, my dad worked days. There wasn't anybody there to really mentor you or listen to you. So Palama was my home. I would even, you know, take showers here because they had running hot water. We had no really hot water at home. We had to boil water on the stove and be in a bathtub with no shower, no hot water, taking a shower at Palama was a treat because we had hot water, running hot water.

PR: Well, we're glad you found us at Palama Settlement and thank you so much for this special, special time spent with you.

DK: You're welcome. It's like I said, it's so nostalgic. Every time I pass by Palama or I come here, like yesterday, I was here for the painting murals and just going into the gym and just seeing the floors, they look so pristine. They look so good. I mean, you've really done a pretty good job at taking care of the facilities here. Because, you know, the gym was there when I was little. I recall the old gym. They had a wooden gym where the parking lot is kind of there. Then when they broke that down, then they built the gym that we have there today. And so, God, you know, I not going tell you how old I am, but the gym was there when I was there. So, you know, a lot of years have gone by. A lot of

people have used the gym and it still looks great. So you folks have done a great job. Yeah.

PR: Thank you. And also thank you on behalf of the State. You've contributed so much.

DK: Thank you. Yeah, and I do support Palama continually. I was on the board, but we do give grant-in-aids. Usually Palama is on the top of my list for CIP or grant-in-aids from the state. I understand you folks have a capital projects that you're going to be [doing] next year and probably come in for some funding. I know we gave you folks last year funding and so hopefully we'll be able to continue to support Palama and all the good work that you folks do for all the kids to come.

PR: Thank you. Thank you.

DK: You're welcome.

PR: We have two buildings that will be 100 years old next year and they need a lot of help (laughs).

DK: One of the things that I wish would have happened more was reunions, that Palama would have hosted more reunions of people that have come here. Because there are a lot of people out there that had been affected by Palama and there are a lot of people that could really support Palama. But I don't think that Palama over the years have really cultivated that. I recall trying to organize a reunion in the past and the director at the time wasn't very open to doing something like that, which I thought was sad because I would have loved to see some of the people when I was growing up there. And, you know, renew our friendships and so forth. But I think that's something that Palama can do better in the future, is to call on the community and call on the people like myself who were really cultivated and influenced here at Palama and we're willing to give back.

PR: Yes, we need to do a lot more of that. We don't have to wait for a centennial or 125th anniversary.

DK: Yes. Exactly. Because Palama people just love to come back. They love this place. You know, it's just something about Palama back then that we have good memories of. And many people are passing, passing and so lost a lot of people. But there are still people out there that have good memories of Palama. And people, you know, like Cha Thompson, like Brother Noland and people who are willing to give back. So we continue to give back.

PR: And people like you. Thank you so much.

DK: You're welcome.