

KOKUA HAWAII ORAL HISTORY PROJECT INTERVIEW WITH  
**Lucy Witeck**

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*Lucy Witeck*  
*Photo courtesy Witeck family*

*Lucy Witeck was a member of Kokua Hawaii in the early 1970s, helping to form a core of locally-born leaders and participating in demonstrations as well as helping in the production of the group's newspaper, the Huli. Witeck was born in Waipahu and grew up in Wahiawa. She served as a VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) volunteer after high school in southwest Virginia, and was a peace activist protesting against the Vietnam War after returning to Hawaii. While working at the Hawaii Newspaper Agency, she served as international vice president of the Newspaper Guild, CWA. She was interviewed at her home in Kalihi on October 1, 2016.*

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

LW: I was born in 1946 in Waipahu. The clinic was near the site of the former Ota Camp near Waipahu Depot Road. We lived in a house behind KAHU radio station until I was five years old. In the middle of kindergarten, my dad finished building a house in Wahiawa, so we moved to Wahiawa in the middle of the school year.

GK: In Waipahu, who were your friends?

LW: In Waipahu, I was very isolated because we lived across from Farrington Highway below the main town of Waipahu, and it was very rural. It was where my dad grew up. He had worked in the rice paddies with my grandpa until some disease wiped out the rice. It was a two-story house with running water. The toilet was an outhouse.

GK: What did your father do in Wahiawa?

LW: He was a carpenter, working islandwide. He built our house on Rose Street.

GK: How was your education?

LW: I graduated from Leilehua High School in 1964. I didn't want to go to college just yet, but my parents expected me to go, and I had been on a college track in high school.

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GK: So, you attended the University of Hawaii?

LW: For one year, until I got kicked out for bad grades.

GK: Sorry to hear that.

LW: No. It was good.

GK: (Laughter) Tell me how it was good.

LW: It was good because I couldn't go to school for at least a semester. I applied to VISTA (Volunteers In Service To America) so I could go somewhere else, and perhaps do something useful. I'd been reading books about Native American reservations and how people could be helpful there. I looked up the Peace Corps, but you needed a college degree, and it was to foreign countries. I thought I should try to be helpful to my country first. I said to myself, "Oh, okay. That'd be something different."

GK: So where did you go?

LW: They sent me to train in Eastern Kentucky, Wolfe County. I was 19.

GK: How was that?

LW: VISTA sent me to a county that, just a week before I arrived, had run out the only African American family in the whole county, with guns and everything. But I didn't know that at the time. When I went there, I had six weeks of training with another VISTA volunteer, and everybody was really nice. They were saying, "Hawayah. Hawayah. Hawayah." I couldn't tell if they're saying, "How are you?" or "Hawaii." Talk about an accent! It was very rural. I guess I got a totally different reaction than the African American family had. There was only one of me, they'd never seen anyone who looked like me, I guess. I am shorter than most people, I had long hair. Very nonthreatening, I guess. I'd be walking down a street, and I'd turn around, and there's, like, five or six kids following me, whispering, trying to figure out, "What the heck is she?" But they were really nice.

GK: So, there weren't too many Asians?

LW: None, nada, zero. It began to snow, in November. We couldn't drink the water in the well at the house I was at. The school in that community was a one-room school house. I thought they existed only in novels. I had believed there was no such thing as outhouses anymore, only in my distant memory from Waipahu. But there were both in the hills and hollows of Kentucky in 1965. The outhouse next to the school was familiar. I trained in a white community. The VISTA volunteer stationed there had this station wagon that you had to start with a screw driver. You had to open the hood, have the metal part of the screw driver connect to two parts and then run back in and start the car. And it was a manual. I didn't know how to drive a manual. It was, like, holy moly!

GK: (Laughter) So what happened?

LW: After training in a rural white community, I was placed in a small African American community in Glade Spring, southwest Virginia. Go figure. Government? Schools had just been integrated in Virginia, and the former schoolhouse for the African American students had just been purchased by the residents to be used as a community center through the federal Community Action Program.

GK: What was your job?

LW: My job was to help organize and put together a library and work with the kids there. I helped to get the community center in order.

GK: How?

LW: I went to various churches and organizations soliciting books for the library, met with kids and parents from the community to get things started. There was a toilet in the building that wasn't functioning. So, we said, "We want that toilet fixed because in the winter it's really cold to go outside. And there's no reason why we can't get this to function." We argued with my CAP (Community Action Program) supervisor, who was white, who wanted to build an outhouse rather than repair the toilet.

GK: What happened?

LW: We got our indoor toilet.

GK: Mm-hmm.

LW: I ended up in more ditches, driving my car in the snow, than I care to remember. But people were always nice. They pulled me out of the snow. (Chuckles)

GK: Oh, that's good. The white people gave you books and things like that?

LW: Yes. But not all of them were as friendly as you would hope. Some things stick out in my memory. I spent most of my time with the African American kids. This is coal mining territory. So, we'd be walking. . . and I was with these kids who were 9, 10, 11 years old. There are poor whites in the area, just down the road from the African American community. We passed this one house, and there was this little girl. She must have been about two years old. Dirty face, raggedy clothes, standing on the porch. And she's smiling and waving, and saying, "Hi, n-----! Hi, n-----!" And the kids with me wanted to go up and bust her up. I'm going, "Wait a minute. She doesn't know any better. . . You're just gonna reinforce her negative opinion of African American people." But that's where it starts.

GK: How long did you stay?

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LW: I was there a year, and I worked also with white kids from Emory and Henry Colleges. . . The white kids were volunteers and would come and work with the kids and community center.

GK: What did VISTA volunteers get at that time in terms of money and housing?

LW: (Chuckles) Oh, God! They helped find housing. I think I got \$85 a month.

GK: How was living there?

LW: I was comfortable in the community. Not so much at the college. The college kids invited me to a dance once. I went, but felt so out of place. I felt so alienated from that culture. Yet it wasn't so different from my life in Wahiawa. I just remember feeling like, "I don't really want to be here." So then I didn't go over there. I mostly hung out with the African American kids.

GK: How was it hanging with the African American kids?

LW: They ranged in ages from maybe 10 to 16 years old at the center. We would just sit there, sit around and just yak. I remember one time, they asked, "How come you hang out with us?" They wanted to know why I didn't hang out with the college kids more. The college kids were more my age. And because I was neither African American, nor white, I could be in either community because nobody could categorize me. I think they thought surely, if I had a choice, I would hang out at the "better" place.

GK: What did you tell the African American kids?

LW: I had to think about that. I told them, "Because I like you guys better." (Laughter) You could see my response register on their faces, in terms of what they thought of themselves—"She likes us better. . ."

GK: I guess living there was different than living in Hawaii. Any more examples?

LW: After going to a carnival with one of the college kids and three or four of the community kids, I was driving us home and it was pretty cold. So I said, "Oh, I want hot cocoa." They said, "Yeah. We want hot cocoa." So I pulled into this restaurant that was open. And the minute I pulled into this restaurant, the kids said, "Oh, we don't want any hot cocoa." (Laughter) They also said, "No. No. We're not cold. We don't want hot cocoa. . . ." I said, "What do you mean? Two minutes ago, you said you were cold. Let's go." None of them said anything. I dragged everybody out. We went into the restaurant. I'm ushering everybody in. We looked, and the only table big enough to accommodate us was at the very end of the restaurant. So we had to walk past all the other customers. We sat down, I turned around, and every single head in that restaurant was, like, looking at us. (Chuckles) I just chalked it up to them staring at me because I looked different. I was so used to it by then. We wait. I tell the kids after a while, "Gee. Their service is so terrible.

They're so slow." The waitress finally comes, and we order hot cocoa. We drank the hot cocoa. We paid our bill.

On our way home, one of the kids finally told me that they don't serve African American people in there. I said, "What? What do you mean? We're customers." They said, "But they don't serve African American people there." Then, I realized, "Oh, that's why they took so long."

GK: So, they were staring at you not because you were Asian, but because they don't serve African American people. I guess the restaurant made an exception with these kids?

LW: (Laughs) Well, we got our cocoa. Now that I think about it, hope they didn't spit in it. In any case, we survived my ignorance.

GK: What was your sense of what was happening in the community?

LW: The interesting thing about working in Glade Spring was the absence of young men. It kind of hit you when you looked at the community. There were school-age kids, then older married men in their twenties, thirties. Between 18 and 28, there are no young single men. There were minimal job opportunities. Either you left or joined the military.

While I was there, there was one African American soldier from the community who had been killed in Vietnam. The war was just starting to heat up.

GK: Did that experience change your perception of the world?

LW: I'd been taught that people should be able to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, work hard and you'll be successful. But I remember thinking at the time, "What if you didn't have any bootstraps? What do you pull yourself up by? These guys had literally nothing.

GK: How was the white community?

LW: I was briefly assigned to, and stayed with a poor white family, where, honestly, I did not feel safe. I was really, "Oh my God." I was really scared. They looked at me as if I were an alien. It was a bit disturbing. I was soon reassigned back to Glade Spring. Anyway, this family had a puppy that was in bad shape. He couldn't stand up, was very weak, and flea infested. Obviously, they didn't know how to take care of him. So, I asked if I could have him. I don't remember if I paid anything for him, but I think they thought he was dying anyway. I took him to the vet, took all my money to pay the vet. He got dewormed. He got medication, I got up to feed him baby food through the night. He survived. He was about four months old when he was hit and killed by a truck. I had left him at home while I went to the park with some of the kids. A witness said my dog and another dog were on the shoulder of the road, when a guy in a truck veered off the road, aiming for both dogs. One got out of the way, mine did not.

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GK: Wow.

LW: Everybody in the community knew that was my dog. He wasn't that old, so he wasn't as street smart as the other dog.

GK: Wow.

LW: The witness said it was a white guy in a truck who deliberately killed my dog. So, I'm thinking, well they couldn't kill me, or maybe they would have. But they were not happy with what I was doing there. So, their way of getting back would be to get my dog.

GK: Wow. So, you spent a year there, and then what happened? You flew back to Hawaii?

LW: I came home.

GK: How did that experience inform you about your experience here in Hawaii?

LW: I was totally disoriented. It made me re-examine what I had grown up thinking—this whole idea of a melting pot, everybody equal and, yada, yada. It was like, “Okay, now let me look at this.” You have different eyeballs on it. I had come back from Virginia looking at the war very differently. When you see a disproportionate number of a certain group of people being negatively affected, then you kind of like look at war differently.

GK: What did you do?

LW: Okay. So, I came home and had a hard time readjusting, because after being out on my own, making decisions that affected my life, and taking care of myself for a whole year, coming home—and having my mom say, “Well you have a midnight curfew. . .”— did not go over well. I re-enrolled at the University of Hawaii-Manoa, on academic probation.

GK: So, how'd it go?

LW: All right. I was going to school full time. Home was a bit tense, so I moved out and got a job at Flamingo Cafe working 48 hours a week. My dad co-signed for a car loan. I barely passed that semester, had like straight Cs. I didn't get my degree until nine years after I started school.

GK: How did you get involved in activism at the University of Hawaii?

LW: Actually, I was dating Wayne “Ko” Hayashi who got involved in the draft resistance movement in its early days, and he introduced me to John Witeck, who was attending the East-West Center. That was in 1968. Because of my experiences in Virginia, I was looking at the Vietnam War differently, and what the Resistance members were saying resonated with me.

GK: What activities were you involved in at the university?

LW: I was involved in the Bachman Hall sit-in in 1968 involving Oliver Lee.

GK: He was the one who was denied tenure because of his anti-Vietnam War activities. What happened?

LW: I got arrested at Bachman Hall.

GK: What did your parents have to say?

LW: Oh, let's see: "What was I doing? I was causing my father's heart condition." It was all these terrible things that I was doing. I was jeopardizing my brother's career in the military. My family members said that people were calling them up saying, "What's wrong with your daughter?"

GK: What was your brother doing in the military?

LW: He was actually at that point becoming a career military person. He was a captain in the Army, and he flew helicopters. Family members said I was threatening his security clearance. And, I said, well they should judge him on his actions, not on anybody related to him.

GK: Where did you get this kind of resolve?

LW: From my father. He was very down to earth and very logical. If he couldn't find a tool to do a particular task, he'd make one. So, you know, you look for solutions, rather than sit there and whine about what you can or can't do.

GK: So, did you find applications of that in say, your early activism?

LW: Well, if I didn't like what the group was doing, I wouldn't participate. Like Kokua Hawaii did tons and tons of meetings. So did the Resistance. So, did the RCP (Revolutionary Communist Party). So did all these groups. I mean, they'd have all these meetings. I'm not against meetings per se, I just don't like to sit forever just to hear people say the same things over and over. I told them to, "Call me when you want me to paint the sign, or bake something or whatever. But I'm not coming to meetings, unless you're going to do something constructive."

GK: Did you find any support in your activism from your father's generation?

LW: The one person who helped was state Sen. Nadao Yoshinaga.

GK: How did that happen?

LW: My dad used to go fishing at Ewa Beach all the time with his throw net. He ran into Nadao at the beach one day and they got to talking. My dad grew up in Waipahu so I

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guess they knew each other. Of course, he was complaining about me. And then Najo was complaining about his daughter, and yet he was saying, "But you know what? They're right." He came out in support of anti-war protesters. He was the first, what some might regard as, legitimate person, or a person of my father's generation who was respected and who was supportive. And so, my dad was, "Oh, wait a minute." So, he stopped and he kind of thought about what Najo said, and said that what Najo said was always very helpful.

GK: How did you get involved in supporting the anti-eviction struggle in Kalama Valley?

LW: It was sort of a progression. It began at the Youth Congress, with talks about seceding from the U.S. and all of these different ideas that the delegates were coming up with. John was very involved in local struggles, including Kalama Valley. I got more involved after the haoles were kicked out. Remember, we had a baby to care for as well.

GK: I know it was a controversial decision. Did you agree with it?

LW: The thinking behind it made sense because during earlier anti-war and resistance protests, the charge was that outside haole agitators were coming in and stirring up our good local kids to break the law and protest. It was as if local kids did not have a brain of their own. For Kokua Kalama, that strategic kind of decision said, "Okay. This is a locally run organization, and yes, we have supporters who are not local. Many are haoles. But we're not blaming them for anything that we say, think or do."

One of the good things that came from the Kokua Kalama struggle was this whole idea of localism. It spawned a whole lot of ideas and shifts in perception of the protest movement. . . . It said, "Yes, we're local people, and we're not placid, compliant, obedient, colonized people."

GK: What kind of things did you do to help out in Kokua Hawaii?

LW: We worked on the newspaper, the *Huli*. I used to do typesetting. I helped with disseminating information.

GK: What other things happened within Kokua Hawaii?

LW: There's a lot of things that went on in Kokua Kalama, like the blatant chauvinism, which the women addressed time and time again.

GK: And which I learned a lot about.

LW: Yes, the struggle continues.

