

## BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Mel Kaneshige

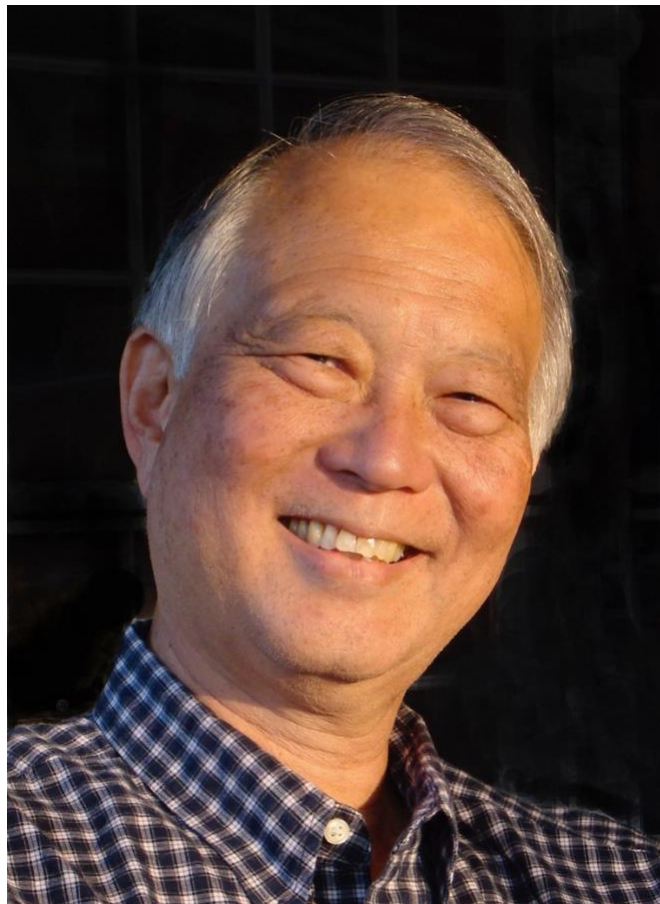
Melvin Yoshio Kaneshige was born in Honolulu on October 4, 1948. His father, Tokuo Kaneshige, and mother, Stella Yoshiko Nakamura Kaneshige, lived in Kaimuki at the time of his birth. He is the eldest of four Kaneshige children. The family soon moved to Halawa Housing, where he attended Halawa Kai Elementary School until the fourth grade, when he switched to Alvah Scott Elementary due to a family move to the Aiea Lani Subdivision.

During his sixth-grade year, his teacher recognized his academic prowess and suggested he be enrolled in a private school. He was accepted at 'Iolani School, which he attended from seventh grade until graduation. At 'Iolani, he played baseball and football, was president of his senior class and wrote for the school newspaper and yearbook. His outstanding high school record enabled him to receive a scholarship to Harvard University for his undergraduate studies. He then went on to the University of Pennsylvania for his law degree and master's degree in city planning.

In 1975, he practiced law in the Honolulu firm of Chun, Kerr & Dodd. In 1995, he was unexpectedly called by a corporate headhunter to interview for a position with Outrigger Hotels to oversee all of Outrigger's real estate. For the next 18 years, he developed, bought, and sold hotels, resorts, and associated retail in Waikiki, Hawaii, and locations in Asia-Pacific.

He has a long history of volunteer service at Palama Settlement, having joined the board in the late '70s and becoming President at the age of 30. In the early '80s he served on Palama's Capital Campaign Committee, which successfully raised \$3million in a matter of months. In 2015, when Palama was considering redevelopment of its 6.2 acre campus, he led the effort with a needs assessment and negotiations with a potential developer.

He and his wife, Nancy Eleanor Pace, MD, have two children, son Pace Kaneshige and daughter Tate Elizabeth Callejas.



Mel Kaneshige

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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW  
with  
Mel Kaneshige (MK)  
April 6th, 2023 Palama Settlement, Honolulu  
Interviewed by Paula Rath (PR)

**PR:** Paula Rath is interviewing Melvin Kaneshige for Reflections of Palama II, April 6th, at Palama Settlement. What's your full name, please?

**MK:** Melvin Yoshio Kaneshige.

**PR:** Y-O-S-H-I-O?

**MK:** Yes. And Melvin with an I, not with a Y.

**PR:** And when were you born?

**MK:** October 4, 1948.

**PR:** And where were you born?

**MK:** Here in Honolulu. Kapiolani Maternity Hospital, which is where everybody was born back in those days.

**PR:** And what's your ethnicity?

**MK:** I am probably shown as Japanese, but I'm really half Japanese and half Okinawan. I say that because for people in Okinawa, they don't really consider themselves full Japanese and people in Japan don't really consider Okinawans full Japanese either. So there you have it.

**PR:** Where do you live currently?

**MK:** I live in Kahala on Aukai Avenue, in a house that was built in 1937. Long, long time ago.

**PR:** Wow.

**MK:** Yeah.

**PR:** I understand the house next door was designed by a famous local architect, Val Ossipoff?

**MK:** Yeah, that's correct. That house was built in 1934, and it was a house that was developed by Theo Davies when Theo Davies was in the subdivision business. Val came over in the late 20's or early 30's, and he was the in-house architect for Theo Davies. So he designed this two story home and there's another floor plan just like it down the street actually on the corner. So it was a very simple house, but we found some articles about what Theo Davies was doing. It was a land owned by Bishop Estate and I think they sold 35 or 36 lots for development and Theo Davies bought 12 of them. This was one of the 12 next door and Ossipoff designed it. I talked with his partner about it and he said, yeah, that was in-house at Theo Davies for a while before he went out with some other people.

So anyway, that's---and we bought the house last year and it still had the old knob and tubed wiring, so we had that replaced. But given the permit situation, the work is done, all the ceilings are out.

We took them all out because we needed electrical work and it was all in the ceilings and we can't put it back until we get a permit, which has been waiting now for a year. So once it's done, we put the ceilings back and our daughter and her family can move in. They're living with us now, so yeah, but it's a pretty neat house. We engaged Glenn Mason, who's probably the foremost historic home architect now in Hawai'i, to take a look at it and make some suggestions. We intend to preserve as much of it as we can, especially under the feeling that it was originally built.

**PR:** Oh, what a treasure.

**MK:** Yeah.

**PR:** My parents had the most ideal situation. They had a beautiful beach house on the water, at Papailoa Road on the North Shore. My father always wanted to live on the North Shore because of his growing up, going to the Palama camp every summer.

**MK:** Right.

**PR:** So for two weeks every year, Val Ossipoff would come and stay at their house.

**MK:** Oh, neat.

**PR:** And in return, he would give them ideas of how to improve it. It was originally just a---like a hicks' home almost. And they added on and added on every year. I still remember my mother, very late in her life, she said, "You know, that Val Ossipoff, he really helped us a lot with this house, but he wouldn't do the one thing that I really wanted to do. I wanted to have a big picture window in the bedroom. And he said, No, bedrooms are not for picture windows. They're not for looking outside, they're for sleeping. So I never got my picture window." She was so cute (Laughter).

**MK:** She forgot she's the owner. She's the client. She can do whatever she wants. Anyway---

**PR:** Yes. I'm not so sure that he considered it that sort of a relationship (laughs), unfortunately for mother. So where did you grow up and where was your first home?

**MK:** Oh, okay. Let's see. My father was a veteran in World War II, and when he came back, got married. Our first home---I was the oldest child---the first home was in Kaimuki somewhere off of Harding Avenue. It may have been 10th, 11th somewhere, but we lived there for a little while when I was maybe up to about two or three. Then we moved to Halawa Housing. Halawa Housing is something that got torn down when the stadium got built in the mid-70's, but it was essentially veterans housing. It was row houses, wooden row houses. You know, there may have been five or six of them all in a row. It's like one long building. It's kind of like living in a barracks, kind of. But I think there were barracks at one time and that's, you know, they became vacated and people started moving in. So we lived there. 8-Y-D Ranger Loop, that's the address, I'll never forget it. It was good because my dad worked at Pearl Harbor. It was probably a ten-minute drive for him to get to work at Pearl Harbor. Grew up there and then went to Halawa Kai elementary school, which obviously got torn down as well when the stadium got built, until the fourth grade.

Then my father bought a house at a subdivision called Aiealani, which is just down the road toward Ewa of the famous 49ers Drive-Inn. It not a drive-inn, but 49ers Restaurant, which is right on Kam Highway and I don't know the side street, but it's been there forever. It was originally set up by some for 442nd vet, you know, it was a diner. So we moved there when I was in the fourth grade. So that would be about 1959---maybe '58, '57, somewhere around there. We lived there for a couple of years and then we moved to a place called Enchanted Hills, which is up the street on the hill just

Ewa of Alvah Scott Elementary School, off of Moanalua Road. It's a subdivision developed by a big developer back then, Joe Powell. He always used the word 'enchanted'. So he did Enchanted Lakes, for example, in Kailua and Enchanted Hills and there's probably other enchanted somewhere. But he was a big, big subdivision developer in a time when the population was growing and the vets were starting to earn money and they needed places to live. So we moved up there when I was in the seventh grade and my father lived there until he died actually in 2009, and my niece owns it now. So it's still in the family. But yeah, so that's where I grew up. Then from there I went to college and then never lived there again.

**PR:** What's your father's name?

**MK:** Tokuo. T-O-K-U-O Kaneshige. He didn't have a middle name. He was the first of seven kids. I guess the tradition back then was just to have a Japanese first name and a Japanese last name, and that was it. The next in line also only had a Japanese name, but the rest of the family starting after that, all had English names and Japanese middle names. It's a long answer to your question. That's it.

**PR:** And what's your mother's name?

**MK:** Mother's name was Stella Yoshiko. Y-O-S-H-I-K-O Kaneshige. Her maiden name was Nakamura and it wasn't till after she died that I found out her maiden name really was [he misspells here] Nakandakari, N-A-K-A-N-D-A-R-I and that was kind of the Okinawan version of Nakamura. So when they came to America, for whatever reason, they used the name Nakamura instead of Nakandakari.

**PR:** Wow, interesting.

**MK:** Yeah, interesting. I don't know why, but, you know, in Okinawa, they have their own language. It's an Okinawan language. It was different from Japanese. And as I said, they were two different countries. Okinawa was its own kingdom. There was a kingdom of Okinawa. Okinawa was very close to Taiwan and was always kind of a separate entity, although they were conquered in, I don't know, the 1600's by the Japanese, but they're fiercely independent.

**PR:** I sense that in the people that I know in Hawai'i who are Okinawan.

**MK:** Yeah, they're very proud of it.

**PR:** Yes.

**MK:** For me, growing up, I didn't really know about the differences, until later in life when I began--some people started telling me, "You're Okinawan right?" And I said, "Yeah. So?" (laughs) You know, then it's kind of like, Oh, okay, Okinawans are different. I never went to Okinawa until I was working at Outrigger when we were looking at property, hotel property in Okinawa. So I went there and I was going to be talking to some Okinawan owners, land landowners, about buying land and maybe---or joint venture with them to build a hotel. Then I thought, You know what? They're going to ask me, "Are you Okinawan?" And I have to answer yes. And then they're going to say, "Well, where is your family from?" And I would have to say, I have no idea. So I called one of my older cousins on my mother's side and I asked her the question. She says, "I don't know, but one of your nieces is living there now, so why don't you email her and she can tell you exactly." So I emailed her and she told me exactly. Gave me an address, gave me---I don't know, it was a Google map, but, you know, it was right there. So I thought, Okay, at least I can answer the question now.

But when I went to Okinawa, I got so busy that I never got the chance to actually go see the family homestead. But interesting. I talked with one of my older cousins yesterday and I told her---I asked her, you know when my grandfather and grandmother came over from Okinawa and she said No, but she can try to find out which is fine because the Hawai'i Okinawa Center keeps records. So I thought, Okay, so she's doing that now. They came over in the early 1900's. My grandfather worked in the sugar fields on Maui, and my grandmother came later as a picture bride from the same village. My cousin told me yesterday, You know, your grandmother---my cousin is actually my second cousin. Her mother and my grandfather and grandmother were cousins. So we're not directly related, we're cousins, anyway---she said, "You know, your grandmother's family had a factory where they made roof tiles." You know the roof tiles that are on all these homes in Okinawa? That's what they use, mostly.

**PR:** Yes.

**MK:** She says, "Yeah, they had a factory." I said, "Well, how come I'm not rich then?"

(Laughter)

She said, "Oh, I don't know. I guess somewhere along the line it got sold or something," anyway, but yeah, I learned a little bit about my grandmother.

**PR:** And that's your---

**MK:** My mother's side.

**PR:** Maternal?

**MK:** Maternal.

**PR:** Okay. What were their names?

**MK:** That's a good question. My grandfather on my mother's side was Seiichi S-E-I-I-C-H-I, Seiichi. Maybe one 'I' too many in there. I don't know what my grandmother's name was, actually. I'm sure I'll find it. Because of this effort, Paula what I'm doing now is realizing I'm going to be 75 years old this year, and I better write all this stuff down now because I have the most knowledge of all of this and leave it for my kids, whether they're interested or not. But at least I'll have written it down for them so they can have it. Because frankly, this effort that you're undertaking caused me to start to think about this. I thought, you know, I better do this now before it's lost, because it will be lost.

**PR:** Yes. I'm so glad. So glad you're doing it. So how many siblings do you have?

**MK:** I'm the oldest, born in '48. I have two sisters and a brother. My sisters were born all in order. So let's see. The next was born---my sister was born in '51, another sister born in '52 and my brother was born in '53. In between me and my next sister there was a stillbirth. So I don't know the details other than what was a stillbirth. They all live here.

**PR:** They do live here. That was my next question. Oh, you're so lucky.

**MK:** My sister, one of my sisters, lives in Pukalani on Maui, and she's got three kids. They all live--two of them live on Maui and one lives on the Big Island. The next sister has two kids. The oldest

lives here, and the youngest lives in California, Silicon Valley. Then my brother has no kids, but he lives here.

**PR:** Okay let's talk about your spouse.

**MK:** Okay. Nancy Eleanor Pace, MD, she has kept her maiden name and she was the middle of three kids. Born and raised in Columbus, Ohio. Her father was a surgeon in private practice, as well as a professor at Ohio State University in medicine and her mom was a homemaker. Her brother, older brother died in the last five years and her youngest brother is still alive. They were born---it must have been family planning---three years apart (laughs). She is---she'll be 70 this year.

**PR:** How did you meet?

**MK:** Well, there's a short version and the long version. The short version is that before starting medical school in 1979, she decided to visit friends throughout the US because she knew once she started in medical school and then what came after that, she would be extremely busy. So she went across the country, ended up in LA, visiting a friend who said, "You know, you really ought to go out to Hawai'i because you're halfway there." And she thought, "It's a long way to Hawai'i." But one of her classmates from Vassar lived in Hawai'i. Her name was Jill Chen. So she came over and her friend, Jill Chen, was dating a friend of mine who was a lawyer. And so a friend of mine called me up and said, "Hey, Jill's classmate from Vassar's in town and she went to Harvard, too." I went to Harvard undergraduate. He says, "I'm sure you guys will have a lot in common." And it was on a Friday and it was the end of a very long week. I was a lawyer then. I was---it was not a good week. I was yelling and screaming at other lawyers and other people, and I had a lot of work to do. So usually an evening is a good time to catch up on your work because nobody calls you. You can actually have some quiet time.

So I was looking forward to that on a Friday. And here's this phone call and I thought, "Ah, the last thing I want to do in the world is go have drinks with a person who went to Harvard, are you kidding?" so he kept, he kept, "No, no," I said, "Okay, okay, okay." So there was a club that doesn't exist anymore called the Plaza Club that was on the rooftop of a building that was very close to where I was working in the AMFAC Center. So I said, "Okay, let's go up there and have drinks," and, you know, just like, let's get it over with. And I was determined to be ornery. I just didn't want to be there (laughs). So we get up there and we're introduced, and the sequence may not be right, but essentially it was---"So I understand you went to Vassar," you know. "Oh, okay, that's a great school, you know," and she said, "Yeah, I bet you haven't been with two Vassar women before." I said, "Probably not." I said, "I understand you went to Harvard Graduate School?" She got a master's in public health. And she says, "Yep." I said, You know, because I was starting to be ornery. I said, "You know, I guess the reason you got in was they let down the standards in the graduate schools for women so that women could get in."

**PR:** Oh, how rude (laughs).

**MK:** I was determined to be rude because I did not want to be there, okay? It's like, come on, just to get out of here. And she says, "No, actually, I think it's the other way around." She says, I think that they let the standards down for the undergraduates. Everyone knows that it's much harder to get into graduate school. You know, and I thought, you know, this girl has spunk. So that's how the evening went. It was like one thing after another, we just kind of a battle, I thought, hm. But at the end of the evening, I thought, you know what? I'm going to marry this girl. First time I ever met her, right? Then she went back to school or started school at the University of Cincinnati. So we talk literally every day. That was when you actually had to pay money.

**PR:** Oh lots (laughs).

**MK:** (Laughs) For long distance calls, right? But it was usually---like now, six-hour difference, you know, with daylight savings, so whenever she was getting up, I'd be going to sleep kind of thing. That's when we talked. But it went on and then we got married. She---this is at the end of her third year [in] medical school. So, she finished here at the UH Medical School and then went back to graduate at the University of Cincinnati in '83. But that's kind of the medium-length story of how we met.

**PR:** Is she a cardiologist?

**MK:** No, she actually was a surgeon and never really practiced because what happened was when she was in her residency---she's very impatient sometimes. So she lifted a patient off the table to put him onto the gurney and she hurt her back. So she went back to Ohio, to the Cleveland Clinic to get her back operation. So she was laid up for a little while. Then she was---she could come back. It was then that we decided to have children. That decision was made jointly that in order to raise our kids, it'd be better if she stayed home and watched the kids and take care of them.

So it was a tremendous sacrifice on her part, that she would be willing to do that because she's a tremendous doctor. I've talked to people who she's worked with, who have said yeah, it's a tremendous loss to the profession, that she didn't become a doctor. I mean, even today, I mean, she---I never worry about the medical side because you ask a question, she's got an answer. And it's like, "Wow, how do you know that?" You know, and she still remembers stuff and she still keeps up. It's amazing. But a lot of people that knew her when she was in school and afterwards have tremendous respect for her. Actually, her main ambition in life as a doctor was really to practice overseas doing missionary work, missionary medical work and not getting paid, but just doing work. My biggest ambition for her was to actually work, make money, and I would retire, you know, but somehow that never happened (laughs). So it's okay. So she's done several medical missionary trips to Africa and to Asia with organizations or with our church. Yeah, she's an amazing one.

**PR:** Yes, I know her and she is. Let's talk about your children.

**MK:** Okay. We have a son and a daughter. Our son just made 36 yesterday, as a matter of fact. His name is an interesting amalgamation, combination of our parents---our father's names. His name is Pace William Tokuo Kaneshige. So he's got Nancy's father's name, William Pace. And he's got my father's name, Tokuo Kaneshige and it's all together in one. He got married in 2020 to a Canadian Chinese girl who lived in Toronto. They had one son that was born last year, two months premature. His name is Koa Rose Kaneshige. They live in New York City. He's a solid kid. If you go to City Mill and you buy a little bag of cement, you know, it's kind of like a bag of sugar and you feel the cement bag like it's totally solid, never gives. That's Koa. He's totally solid. He's like a bag of cement. It's like, I couldn't believe how hard he is. Most babies are soft, right? You press, your fingers go into the baby---not this kid. This kid's solid. Anyway, that's Koa.

Our daughter, her name is---at birth, Tate Elizabeth for her grandmother. Mieko, just because it's a Japanese name---Kaneshige. She is 33. She's married to a guy named Mario Alberto Callejas C-A-L-L-E-J-A-S Junior. He is an American citizen born in Miami, but he's really half Nicaraguan and half Ecuadorian. The reason he was born in Miami, I am told, was that his grandfather was vice president of Nicaragua, and when the civil war erupted in the 80's, the family needed to leave. So that's why he was born in Miami. They have---his family's really big, like the family now is in Texas. I've been told he has more than 60 1st cousins.

So they're with the family now, however many there are. They have two children. The oldest is a girl. Her name is Ana A-N-A, kind of the Spanish---Hispanic spelling. Ana---I forgot her middle name. Anyway, she's three and a half. Her birthday is actually next month, May 1, she'll be four. She has a sister whose name is Stella, after my mom, Marie Callejas. She was born on April the 12th, a year ago. So her birthday is coming up next week. Yeah, they're great kids there and they're living with us now until their house is finished next door.

**PR:** So they're coming home.

**MK:** They're coming home. That's our---that's our old age insurance. They're living next door. (Laughter).

**PR:** But any signs of Pace coming home or is he ensconced in New York?

**MK:** He's ensconced in New York for now. He just changed jobs. His employer actually is located in California somewhere. So we thought, Why don't you move to California? You know, but no---in this day and age, he can do it virtually. So he likes New York. He's lived in Tokyo, London, New York, London because of school. He spent a year abroad. Tokyo because---actually more towards Yokohama. After he graduated from college, he spent a year in an English language program as a teacher. And now New York. He's been in New York for I don't know, five years maybe. He does---his work is right now doing landing pages for---landing pages for websites. Believe it or not, that's a specialty. I said, "Why doesn't just, you know, people who do Internet sites do their own landing pages?" He says, no, no, no, it's a specialty because the landing page has to grab you when you first get to whatever site you are, and then it has to lead you into the other parts of the site. I thought, "That doesn't make sense." Why can't regular web page designers do that? Nope, it's a specialty. It's like, okay, well, I don't make the rules. That's fine.

**PR:** Well, it's like doing trailers are a specialty in the film industry.

**MK:** Yeah, that's true.

**PR:** It's got to get---got to grab them somehow.

**MK:** Yeah. So---which is unusual because he was---after college, he got into USC to go to law school and business school, which is a great combination. And he said, you know what? I'm going to put it off for a year. Okay, that's fine. Then the year went by and he said, "You know what? I don't really want to do that." Practicing law is tough. I would---if someone said they wanted to practice law, I'd tell them it's really hard work. It's very grueling. It's like working in a coal mine, essentially, because you got to put in the hours. There's no substitute for that. And you got to produce the coal, which is the work, the pages, whatever you're doing. You get paid essentially by the hour, by the minute, and if you don't put the time in, you don't get paid. That's it. It's really simple. There's got to be a better way to make a living. I mean, I was a lawyer for 20 years and it was grueling then, it's worse now. It's kind of like going into medicine. I would never tell people to go into medicine. It's very different now. Unless you love the practice of medicine, you don't mind not making any money and always being subject to potentially being sued for something that you didn't do. But that's another story. So we're trying to entice them. But his wife's family is in Toronto, and New York is very easy to get to from Toronto. So we'll see. Life is long.

**PR:** So let's talk about your education.

**MK:** Okay. As I said earlier, I grew up first---thank you---first in Halawa. So I went from kindergarten through the middle of fourth grade out of a school that doesn't exist anymore---is

Halawa Kai Elementary School. It was right next to a small shopping center that doesn't exist anymore where they had a little supermarket, they had a Stewart's Pharmacy, they had a barber shop where I went and some other stores. But it was the rickety old wooden buildings in that area now that's probably a parking lot for Aloha Stadium.

So K through middle of fourth grade I went there and it was easy because I could just walk to school. It was kind of the idyllic growing up. You walked to school, walk home, everything was easy. Then in the fourth, middle of the fourth grade, we moved to Aiealani. So I went to Alvah Scott Elementary School. That was a very difficult transition because the academics at Alvah Scott were miles ahead of Halawa Kai. So I can remember just having a hard time, especially in math, understanding the concepts and all of that. It was very, very frustrating. But I got it in the end. So the middle fourth grade---the sixth grade, I was there. Again, we live very close, so it was just walking down the hill to school every day. I was a JPO, so I controlled the access in and out of the school. I blew my whistle and the sign went down, "Stop!" And I blew my whistle, the sign went up, "Okay, you can pass," kind of thing. It was kind of fun.

Then while I was in the sixth grade, apparently my sixth grade teacher told my parents, you should apply to private schools because he's got some talent. He'd do better in a private school than a public school, which I didn't know till later. So one day my dad says, "Okay, you're going to go test at 'Iolani." You know, I thought, Okay, just---those were the days when your dad said something, you just said, "Okay, no problem. Yes. Where do you want me to go? When?" you know, you just did what your parents said. So I went, I tested and I got in. We didn't have much money back then. This is the story that I heard later. My dad talked to the assistant headmaster, David Kuhn, and said, I don't know the answers, the test fields, might be five bucks or something. "So if Mel doesn't get in, can I have my money back?" (laughs). And Dave [David] Kuhn laughed at him and said "No."

But I got into 'Iolani, so in seventh grade I started at 'Iolani. Back then there was a---and there's still is---a country bus called country bus that collected kids that lives all over the country that went to private schools, like 'Iolani, Kamehameha, Sacred Hearts, Saint Louis, and then dropped them off. So I'll never forget my first day. We were living in Aiealani, which is pretty much on Kam Highway, and I had to go to Moanalua Road to get the bus because there was a bus stop there, and it was right across the street from something called the Leeward Hospital. Back then it was---all plantation communities had some small hospital and this is the plantation community of Aiea. So they had a small hospital called the Leeward Hospital. It was up on a hill. To get there, it sounds kinda hokey, but I had to walk through the cane field to get there. So that's fine. You know, I'm with my little briefcase and walking over there. Of course I missed the bus. The bus either missed me or I missed the bus. So I came home and found me a ride. So I got to school. That was kind of the way I went to from school for the first couple of years on the school bus.

We had a guy whose name I won't forget just because it was unusual Kimo Campbell and it turned out to be one of the Campbells of the Campbell Estate, which I didn't know Campbell Estate from anything, right? He's an okay kid. We had Arakawa's from Arakawa Store and all these people. So--interesting. So I was at 'Iolani from seventh through twelfth. So that was six years from '59 to '66. Graduated '66. Again, back in those days, Hawai'i was very insular. We were very cut out from the world and cut out from the rest of the United States. We got sports, we got baseball games a week late, right? Or football games, we got them a week late. We never saw anything right away. Yeah, we had tourists coming in on jet planes, but still we were pretty much isolated from the rest of the world.

The reason I say that is, is there was very little kind of appreciation of what the rest of America was like. I say that because, it's like I was always expected to go to college. My dad left high school to help his family with money. So he left Farrington [High School] before the war and then when the

war broke out, he volunteered for the for 442nd. Then survived, came back, he got his GED and then decided to go to night school at the UH because he wanted a college degree. So I think when I was in the seventh grade is when he got his degree, a college degree. So they always valued education.

My brother and I went to 'Iolani, our two sisters went to the Priory. So it was very, very important. And I was always expected to go to college, it was like, Okay. So when it became time in my junior year to apply, I didn't know anything. So we were---'Iolani, the administration was pretty much run by Yalies. They're almost all Yale grads. So the guy that was our college counselor was a Yale grad. So it was like, okay. So I asked him, you know, "Which schools should I apply to?" So he gave me five: Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Cornell and Stanford. So I don't know anything from anything, right? It's like, "Okay I think I've heard of those schools, but okay."

(Laughter)

Seriously, I mean, that's why I tell you we were isolated, right? I mean, we're totally isolated. I'm a kid from Aiea, right? What do I know about anything? So it's like, 'Okay, if that's where I should apply, I'll apply.'" So I applied and then I thought, Oh, this is actually kind of good because I'll get rejected by some and then my choices will be easier, right? It'll be good. I was playing sports, baseball, football. I was president of the class. I wrote for the newspaper and the yearbook and all that. So I was a good candidate, but I didn't know that because, again, you know, I don't know anything from anything back then. I thought, Oh, this is good. So on April one, I'll get some skinny envelopes that I'll hopefully get at least one fat envelope, right? The skinny envelopes mean you didn't get anything, fat envelopes means you got in. So one day I'm coming home from baseball practice and I don't know, my mom or dad said you got some envelopes. So I got five envelopes and they're all fat. So I got into Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Cornell and Stanford. I had interviewed with one of the alumni from Cornell, and he said---and Cornell had a really good baseball team. He said, "If you get in, are you going to go?" I said, "I think so," because, you know, the baseball coach was riding me and all that. Then I thought---then I had a friend who had graduated the year before me, he went to Stanford and he says, "Oh no, you've got to go to Stanford." So I said, "Why?" He says, "Wow, the girls are really beautiful here." So I thought, "Okay, I'm going to go to Stanford."

(Laughter)

So anyway, they all came in and I told my dad, "I'm going to go to Stanford." And he looked at me and said, "No, you're going to Harvard," you go back there and you listen to what your parents said, right? So I thought, oh man. So I said, "Okay, if I don't like it, can I transfer?" He said, "Well, we'll talk about that." And that year, only three kids got into Harvard. Me, Kent Keith and Henry Gaylord Dillingham. So it was like like, you got to go, right? For 'Iolani, especially, you had to go because I'm kind of representing the school, right? If I turned them down, it was like, Oh, wow, we let you in and don't come to our school kind of thing. But again, I don't---Harvard, Yale, Stanford. It didn't register, for me. It's like---it's like a school. It's a school. Okay, I've heard of it. But yeah, but you know, I've heard of the Cleveland Indians and Boston Braves, too, so what the heck? Anyway, so I went, so I went to Harvard, started Harvard and graduated in 1970. It was a great place.

**PR:** Was it culture shock for you at all?

**MK:** The real answer is no, and I don't know why, but I guess I've always been open to different experiences. So it was different, clearly different, but we were all students coming from all parts of the country. My roommates were from Kalispell, Montana, and Needham, Massachusetts. And I'm from Hawai'i. We had roommates across the hall from DC, from Minneapolis. It's just an amalgamation of people that all happened to come together at school. We're all in the same boat.

We don't know anything about anything. Some people knew more about it than I did, but anyway, so it was a time of exploration. I was lucky in that I was a scholarship kid. So I had a scholarship job and my job was cleaning toilets (laughs).

**PR:** You were lucky? (laughs).

**MK:** So I went to school a week early, maybe because they used to clean all the dorms, to get them ready for the kids coming in. So the only people there were us scholarship kids. So we all had no money, and it was good to meet all these different people, and all of a sudden it's like---and they're really interesting and they're nice people for the most part, right? So it was a good time to be there early when all you do is do your job. Then afterwards you talk and go eat and all the rest of that stuff. So it was good to get that experience ahead of time. And I learned how to clean toilets, which my wife doesn't believe. But anyway, I do know how to clean toilets.

So anyway, I got there early, did that and---Boston definitely is different, you know, and that's the Northeast. But once you get there and you begin to understand kind of the psyche of the Northeast, people think it's the center of the world. I mean, they really do. They think everything else is the hinterlands. You know, we rule the world from Boston and New York. It's kind of like, okay, it's a little different. So you kind of get to understand that a little bit, but you know it's bogus. But yeah, it was different. But everyone was different. After my junior year, I stayed up there and I remember going to a wedding in Marblehead, which is kind of an older community on the seashore north of Boston. This little old lady comes up to me and she says, "This is a brownie. Have you ever had a brownie before?" I said, "Yeah, actually, I like chocolate. It's pretty good." And she looks at me and she says, "You know, you speak English pretty well." And I said, "Yeah, you know, I've been here for a couple of years now."

(Laughter)

Yeah, it's okay. I got it. It's just interesting the perspectives of people that are not themselves exposed to other ethnicities---the best way to put it. But very nice people. I got to say, very, very nice. I never ran across anyone who was mean or vicious or---I mean, they may have been prejudiced, but it never showed. I remember that's when I realized that growing up in Hawai'i was something very special because I had a Chinese friend from New York City and he came up to me one day, he says, "Mel, you're Asian, but you're really different." I said, "Yeah." He said, "Growing up in Brooklyn, as a Chinese guy, I'm a definite minority and we're definitely prejudiced against---there's prejudice against us," And he said, "You don't act that way." I said, "Well, where I grew up, we're actually we're not the majority, but we're a large part of the community. So it's different, growing up in Hawai'i," It was then, that conversation made me realize what a special place this is, to grow up in a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural place, which is in the end, why I decided really to move back to Hawai'i, because I thought, I think if I get married and have kids where I want my kids grow up, because it is different and it gives you something that you will not get anywhere else in the country, I don't think.

**PR:** That's been my experience, too. And my son's for sure.

**MK:** My first couple of years, it was like, wow, this is a big world out here. I'm going to be in the Foreign Service. I'm going to join the State Department and travel the world. I'm not going back to Hawai'i. Are you kidding? Then you start thinking about other things in life and you start thinking, you know, gee what's important? That's when I decided I'm going to move back.

**PR:** So let's just finish the education track and law school came next?

**MK:** What happened was, if you remember, 1970 was kind of the middle or towards the end of the Vietnam War. So in my senior year, I can remember coming back on a date from Boston, having to get off the subway a stop early because they had closed down the Harvard Square stop because there were troops---military troops and tear gas in the air all around Harvard because of demonstrations. So there were a lot of demonstrations. I participated in some---that going on in Washington, DC. Marches and also around Harvard as well. So there was a lot of commotion. Back then in the mid to late 60's, if you were in school, you had an automatic deferment, so you weren't going to get drafted. Then that changed. So it doesn't matter now. Then in order to make the system maybe work a little more fairly, what was done nationally was the Selective Services, we're going to have a lottery. We're going to establish a lottery based on your birthdate. So it was like, Hm, what I need to do is---I shouldn't go to law school right away.

I need to figure out if I'm going to get drafted or not. So it was also at a time where I got married. After my senior year, I graduated in June. In September, I got married to a girl that was from here. She went to Punahou then she was at school at Pine Manor Junior College and then Wheaton College, which is in Northern Massachusetts. We got married and I took a year off because I wanted to figure out whether I was getting drafted or not. My lottery number was high, fortunately. So I knew I wasn't going to get drafted.

I applied to law school and city planning school because I was just interested in real estate and land use planning. There were three schools in the country that had joint degrees: Harvard, Penn and Berkeley. So I applied to all three. I got into Penn and Berkeley, I didn't get into Harvard. So I wrote to Penn and I said, "Can I just delay a year because I'm not ready to go yet?" And they said, "Fine." I didn't want to move all my stuff from the East Coast to the West Coast. So I stayed at Penn (laughs), but I spent a year out and I worked at the Hawai'i Housing Authority.

What happened was back in the 60's and 70's, the 442nd alumni veterans ruled the state. John Burns was the governor and department heads were all for 442nd vets. So my dad was a 442nd vet. So I got hired on the governor's staff assigned to Hawai'i Housing Authority. So I spent a year at the Housing Authority doing things like selling houses for the state in Hilo, working with a bunch of other things that they had me work on. But it's interesting, I got to say. So the office was out in Liliha, Kalihi, actually very close to Palama. So that's where I went every day.

Then that year ended, I went to school in Philadelphia. Spent four years there and got a law degree, as well as a master's in city planning. A joint degree that normally takes five years. Three years of law school, two years of city planning. But when you combine them, you can cut out a year. So that was fun. When I was working at Hawai'i Housing Authority, I worked with the Bank of Hawai'i and other banks because they provided funding for the homes that the state was building. All this hullabaloo about housing shortages, etcetera, it goes way, way back. There have been articles written about it and it really started to hit a crisis mode in 1970. In 1970, the then governor, John Burns, appointed a housing czar, and his name was Bill Cook. Bill was a former---I think it was an Advertiser writer. But he became the housing czar because the politicians understood that affordable housing was becoming a problem.

So he needed to have some state programs maybe to do something about. So he was the housing czar. Some programs started to come out like the state building houses in Hilo and places like that. But because of all of that, they all needed to be financed. So Bank of Hawai'i was one of them. Through this work in Hawai'i Housing Authority, I met someone who worked at Bank of Hawai'i. Her name was Nancy Taylor. She said, "You know, my husband, Caroll, works at a firm called Chun Kerr & Dodd, and I know you're going to law school and so I'm sure they'd be interested in talking with you about maybe after you graduate." I said, "Yeah, okay." You know, I wasn't really thinking about a job. I didn't even start law school yet. So I had lunch with them, it was pleasant and

they said, "If you ever decide to come back, give us a ring and we could talk." I said, "Okay, fine," put it in the back of my mind.

After my first year in law school, I stayed there in Philly selling Mr. Softee ice cream in the ghetto of West Philadelphia. I didn't understand it was a ghetto back then. So think of this. I'm in this Mister Softee truck that's all lit up. I'm the only person in the truck. I have somebody with me, obviously, because they've got to pay for the ice cream. And I'm cruising the streets of West Philly. A target, right?

**PR:** Yes.

**MK:** Which I never thought about. You know, it's like, hm. Anyway, so I did that for a summer. I can remember these little skinny black kids running up, "Mister, mister, mister!" They want me to stop because they want to buy ice cream. I'd stop, go in the back and they'd say, "Wait, wait, wait." And they got shorts on, they got socks that come up past their knees and they're wearing sneakers. So he takes off his sneakers, takes off his socks, empties the coins out of the sock (laughs) and hands them to me. And he says, Okay, you know, make the cone, give him the cone. I remember one time kid said, "Hey, mister, are you Chinese?" I said, "Nope." He said, "Hm, what are you then?" I said, "I'm Japanese." He says, "Hm, you like being Japanese?" (Laughter) I said, "Yeah, it's okay." He says, "You know karate?" I said, "Oh, yeah, absolutely."

[Imitating] "Oooh" So I'm convinced that because of that, no one bothered me. They thought I could beat them up, but those were the days before guns really came in, because obviously a gun trumps everything. Yeah so it was fairly uneventful, that first year. The second year summer, I came back to Hawai'i and I was counting on getting a job with the governor's office again to do the same thing. Except this time, I got the runaround because he apparently didn't have money in his budget for that. So I kept calling and calling after two or three weeks and it was like, well, we don't have it yet. It was like, the time is running out. I need to make money. It's not like I can spend all summer not working. I have to make some money.

So one day, for some reason, I'm downtown and I'm on Bishop Street, crossing King Street, going towards Bank of Hawai'i and here comes Nancy Taylor walking towards me. We say hello. And then, you know, we go to the side of the street and I said, because I need a job, I said, "Is the firm hiring anybody for the summer?" because I can be a law clerk, right? She says, "Oh, you know, they hired somebody. But the guy committed suicide." It's like, Oh, no. But I'm thinking so they must have an opening. So she says, "I'm sure they'd be happy to talk to you." So I said, "Fine."

So I wait another couple of days cause it's like once I start practicing law, it's kind of the end, it's going to consume you. Finally it's like, I can't wait anymore so I call them up. They said, "Okay, let's go have lunch." We had lunch at Oceania restaurant, which was that floating boat that was down there at Aloha Tower. Because their office was at the AMFAC building right across the street. We have lunch and it's pleasant and right after they said "You want a job?" I said, "Sure." They said, "Okay, come in tomorrow and start." So that's when I started. So I clerked there after my second year, after my third year, when I graduated, and then I got a job there. So, I mean, that's how I got my first job. It worked in with my work at Hawai'i Housing Authority, my year off. It worked in with kind of my schooling and all of that. So I graduated from law school in '75 and then came back, I already had a job, they offered me a job. So I was like, "Okay, this is great." Worked and then passed the bar in October of that year, '75, I was a real attorney then (laughs). That's how I started practice.

**PR:** So Mel you were ensconced in a law firm. You're a lawyer.

**MK:** Yes.

**PR:** And then Outrigger Hotels came calling. What drew you to them?

**MK:** To set the scene, it was 1995. It was the first business day in January. I got a call from a headhunter about meeting about a job at Outrigger. The job was to become the head of real estate for Outrigger. Not as a lawyer, but as essentially a developer asset manager. I called the guy back because I got calls from headhunters before, but they would be calling about not me, but about friends of mine. I always wanted to help my friends, so I would always call them back and give them the references that they needed.

So when this guy said it was about me, I laughed at him. I said, wait a minute. I'm managing partner of the firm. I just hired two or three new associates because we have so much work to do that we're doing now, which is unusual because this was kind of in a time when our economy was down. But I was kind of at the height of my popularity as a lawyer. So I had clients and potential clients just coming in the door. So I said, "No, I don't think so." He said, "No, no, no, we should talk." So I said, Okay. Anyway, so we met at a hotel that was not an Outrigger Hotel. And I said, "How come we're meeting at a non Outrigger Hotel?" He says, "Because when I do work for Outrigger, I don't want other people to know what I'm doing." I thought, Okay, that makes sense. So he explained to me what Outrigger was. Family owned. Properties they had, what they wanted to be done.

Back then I knew---story of my life---I knew nothing about nothing, okay? I had worked on hotel acquisitions before because---for AMFAC. AMFAC owned a bunch of hotels and they were not doing well financially. So every quarter pretty much they had to sell a hotel in order to make their financial objectives. AMFAC was represented typically by Cades Schutte, a big law firm in town. Many times the buyers would be also represented by Cades Schutte. So they have a conflict. So the guys at Cades would call me, "Hey Mel, can you represent blah, blah, blah, they're buying this hotel. We'll represent AMFAC, you represent the buyer." Ah, no problem. Because they knew I wasn't going to steal their client. You know, I do the work, get the transaction done and fine, thank you very much and that's it. So I've done some hotel acquisitions before. Jay Shidler was one of my clients. So I acquired the Waikiki Beachcomber for him in I think '85. He did the Holiday Isle Hotel for Guslander. They beat two or three others.

So I've done some work in the hotel industry, but not I was not a hotel lawyer. I knew nothing about the Kelley family. I knew nothing about Outrigger, I knew nothing about what they had. Then I later learned that they owned or controlled about a quarter of all the hotel rooms in Waikiki, which is huge because Waikiki is---back then had half of all the hotel rooms in Hawai'i. So, you know, big deal, which I didn't really know. But as I said earlier about practicing law, it's a tough business.

Our kids were born in '87 and '90. Yeah so this was when they were eight and whatever. Part of my philosophy at the time was spend as much time with your kids when they're young, because when they're old, forget it, they're gone. You'll never have a chance. So I told my partners before my kids came that I'm working on holidays, weekends, nights. But when our kids are here, I'm not going to be working like this, you know? So it's like I gave them fair warning. So when the kids started to, for example, get involved in sports, I would coach. From soccer, baseball, not basketball, but, you know, those sports. So in season, I would leave work at 3:30, come home, take the kids to practice, have dinner. Around 9:00, I'd start working again. Nine til like midnight every day. It's very grueling to do that. But you had to do it because unless you put the hours in, you don't get paid.

So it gets old after a while, and it was like a never ending line of clients and work, which is good because that means you can earn money, rather than not having any work, which means you can't earn any money. So it's a double edged sword. But I was getting burned out by then. The top four

guys were Ed Chun, Bill Dodd, I mean George Kerr, Bill Dodd and myself. The top three, Chun, Kerr, Dodd were in their 60's already and I was 47 and I looked at them and I thought, "They're kind of burned out. Do I want to be like that in ten years or 15 years?" Because that's what's going to happen. I'll have a lot of work. I'll have a lot of clients. I'll have people to help me and all that. But that's what it is. And I thought, I have a planning degree. I had sat on the City Planning Commission, and my work revolved around real estate. So I thought, this might be more interesting.

But I felt an obligation to the firm because I was the next generation. Those three were older already, and I was kind of the next next leader and I had just hired some people. So I said, "I'm not sure I can do this. I'm not sure I can abandon the firm at this point." So it took me four months. I talked to Nancy, my wife, and she said, "It's up to you, whatever you want to do." So I went back and forth, back and forth, then I thought, "You know what? If I don't do this now at age 47, I'm never going to do it. And I'll always look back and say, what if, what if you know, what if I had done it?" So finally, in the end, I said, you know what? I'm going to do it. So I talked to Nancy and she looked at me. She says, "I knew you were going to do it."

(Laughter)

She said, "Why don't you tell me earlier? I would have---I didn't have to go through this." She said, "I saw the twinkle in your eye when you explained what the opportunity was. So I knew you were going to do it." So it's like, okay. I thought Ed Chun knew what was going on because he was my mentor. I told my other partners and my clients and they were just shocked. It's like, "What? You're our attorney. You can't leave." I kept thinking, "Should I remind them about the 13th Amendment to the US constitution that outlawed slavery?" (laughs) But, I did it. I moved. There's a transition where I had to transition on my work. I remember the first two weeks at Outrigger, I was sitting in an office, and in front of me was one of these box---I don't know what it was called back then---iMacs---but it was a box. One of these little boxes, and that was my computer. I thought, you got to be kidding. This is like the Dark Ages and nobody talked to me and it's like, there's nothing---I was like, What am I doing here? I thought Gee, did I make a mistake? Then I thought, You know what? I'm the boss, so nobody's going to come to me. Just figure out what you want to do and do it.

So I started going through all of our files to understand what properties we had, where they're located, you know, blah, blah, blah. So I got into it fairly quickly and we had one council member who was not a friend of the family, but whom I had supported politically because I knew his family and actually represented his family in some things and he was an enemy of Dr. Kelley's. He had filed something to down zone some of our properties in the Hobron area. So I had to attend to that right away to make sure that that didn't happen. I went to go see him and I said, "I understand the history between you and the family and for whatever reason it is what it is. But I just want to let you know I'm working now for them, so if there's anything I can help you with, let me know. Just kind of left it at that. Anyway. Worked through that. Got his resolution defeated. So we kept our zoning.

Then there are a whole bunch of other things. The Mayor at the time was Jeremy Harris and he had some foresight to realize that he needed really to help Waikiki recover---because Waikiki was down in the doldrums---in order for the economy of the island to recover. So he was suggesting some changes of the zoning code, which were beneficial. I had just hired as our director of planning, a guy who was director of planning for HCDA [Hawai'i Community Development Authority], whom I had worked with previously. One of my clients decided to build the first reserve housing project in Kaka'ako when I was a lawyer. Believe it or not, HCDA was founded in 1975-76, and it took until like the early 90's before the first reserve housing, which means affordable housing, to be built. It was really a component of the first Nauru project that got built because when they built the Nauru project, they needed to have an affordable component. They were going to lose money on that. So my client bought it from them for like nothing and built the affordable housing project and he

actually made money. But when it came up he says, "No, I'm going to do this. Tell me what the rules are."

So I went back and I read all the rules for HCDA and very skinny, very skinny. Very little direction. So I went to HCDA and I sat down with this guy, Erik Masutomi, explained what we we're doing and I explained that I couldn't find much in terms of what rules we had to follow. So I suggested to him some things and we went over, hashed it out, and he agreed. And that's how we got the thing built. I thought, Wow, here's a government planning zoning official that actually is reasonable. It's not no, no, no. It's like, okay, let's see what we can do. I appreciated that. This guy had a long history of planning within the state, so he knew everybody.

When I went over Outrigger, I gave him a call, I said, "Hey Eric, you want to redo Waikiki?" I could see the opportunity was there. Back then, Waikiki was really isolated and the rest of the city and the county kept it that way. Or maybe the hotel guys kept it that way because they thought, "It's kind of a special area. We govern ourselves." But that wasn't true. You don't govern yourself. You're subject to all the zoning requirements. So to me, it was an opportunity. Hey, we can make Waikiki again part of O'ahu, and we can change some of the rules which we're operating under now to make it more beneficial for us, you know, to develop whatever we need to develop. Background: In 1976 in reaction to the rapid building that was going on in Waikiki, the city passed a new zoning code for Waikiki. They called it back then Waikiki Special Design District. Later became known as Waikiki Special District. They took out the word 'design'. Essentially what it did was it cut the ability to build anything in Waikiki to almost zero. If you had a piece of property that you want to build a hotel on, on the ground, you need to have 50% open space. There's just no way you're going to be able to do that. No hotel in Waikiki at the time had that. So everything that was being built or had a permit was grandfathered. So the owners are like, who cares? We got ours. It doesn't matter. Right? That's fine.

But as the years tick by, guess what happens? The hotel gets older and older and older. Maybe has to get torn down. If it gets torn down. What can you build? You can build half of what you had before. How is that going to work, economically? It's not, right? But in '75, '76, they didn't care because it was like, Okay, forget it. It doesn't matter. When I got there, it was like, you know, we had half the hotel rooms and we had old buildings. Really old buildings that you needed to do something with them. It's like, "Wow, we can't do this." But Mayor Harris was suggesting some things that might be beneficial. So Eric and I worked on it, said, "Okay, let's figure out what we could do." There was a special provision for larger projects. If you had acreage of over an acre, then there's some things you could do with that property. So we worked on that and we use some of our properties as examples of how this might work. So we rewrote that section literally so that it would fit our circumstances. We went back and forth, back and forth---it's a process, right? You have to talk to the right people and get them to agree, otherwise you're not going anywhere. So we would have meetings with Corporation Council, we would have meetings with the heads of whatever the zoning department was called. It was called the Department of Land Utilization at one time. You know, all kinds of different names. Anyway, we meet with all of them and kind of just hash through what we were thinking until we finally ended up with a zoning amendment that we could live with.

**PR:** And really change the face of Waikiki.

**MK:** And because of that, we were, I think, the first or the second to use that special provision. Hilton was there. Then Royal Hawaiian came in as well. But we were acknowledged as the leaders of the renaissance of Waikiki starting in the late '90s, because we worked really---our industry was down in the doldrums. Financially in the world, we had problems. We had the Russian ruble crisis, the Mexican peso crisis, we had the meltdown in the tech stocks that happened. So the economy was in shambles. We were losing our Japanese business because they were going elsewhere. Our

physical product was deteriorating and we couldn't do very much about it because of the zoning. We could only---if you have grandfathered property, you could only fix it up to 10% of the value at a time. How do you do that? A hotel has to be refreshed every seven years. Totally. You got to redo your rooms. Totally. Okay every seven years you got to do it, because otherwise you fall way behind. So we had to find a way to make this possible.

We went through actually four different amendments to the zoning code in order to make it happen. One year, I remember this, Jeremy Harris was running---I don't know who he was running against--I said to him, "Mayor, you know this zoning code we have this terrible, it's just a bunch of band-aids now." I said, "I volunteer. I'll rewrite it so that it does what we intended to do, which you will agree with, and it'll be a lot easier to administer." He said to me, "Mel, let's not do it now. We're in the middle of a campaign. You know, let's just wait." I said, "Okay, okay," so we waited and we never redid it. But it was a tremendous opportunity to remake Waikiki. It's an opportunity that comes more easily when the economics of the state and the world are not good, because at that point, you find willing partners in government to help you because they don't want that either. They want a vibrant, economically stable state or county. So it was a little easier then to kind of get the changes that we wanted. But you have to work with everyone in Waikiki because not everyone wants the same thing.

**PR:** Sure.

**MK:** When we started in '95, we had a neighborhood board that was anti hotel, anti development and it was well known. So we went in first with this Hobron area redevelopment or rezoning and Eric and I prepared our presentation and they meet at the Waikiki Community Center. It's like a gym. So we get there early, like about 5 or 5:30. The place is not even open yet. So we set up our little stands outside the door and as people start coming in, we catch them one at a time. We introduce ourselves, explain what we're doing, tell them what our presentation is going to be like and all of that. Then they open up and we do it formally. That meeting turned the board in our favor. It's like no one actually spent the time to go down there and talk to these people and tell them what you do and tell them why you're doing it, and tell them why it's a good idea. For us, it's like, this is like a no brainer. If you want to do something, you've got to start at the ground level and keep working up until you get everybody on your side. And that meeting, turned the board and from that time on, everything we wanted, they agreed with. It's simple because if you go in with a project or or a proposal, that number one makes sense, you're not cheating anybody. Yeah you're going to benefit. But so does Waikiki because we've always believed that the rising tide floats all boats, and so we're going to help everybody in Waikiki by doing these things. Just by telling people that, they get it. It's like, we're not flimflam artists. We're not trying to pull the wool over your eyes. We're just telling you the truth. This is it and you know it. And so we had a---I think we still have a terrific rapport with the neighborhood board. So it was great, you know, to do things like that, which in my other profession as a lawyer, we could do, but it's a little harder, you know, because we're the lawyer, so anyway.

**PR:** (laughs) Everything's harder.

**MK:** Yeah. Everything's harder. But yeah, that was how I made the transition to Outrigger and then I began to realize that Wow, actually kind of the sky's the limit because unlike maybe other organizations, we have capital. We're not stressed. We can do a lot of different things. So we were buying and selling hotels. We had a beautiful hotel. The Prince Kuhio, which is on Kuhio, it's a beautiful physical hotel, but it wasn't producing what it should have produced in terms of revenues. So I went over, I talked to our head of hotel operations and the hotel manager. I said, "You got to hit this number. You don't hit this number, we're going to sell the property because we can use that money to produce this number elsewhere." Didn't happen. Sold the hotel. So at the beginning, it was

nice because when I walked into a hotel, nobody knew who I was. I could walk around, look at things, and after a while, they understood who I was. So it was like, "What is Mel doing here? Is he going to sell this hotel?" You know so I was like, "Hmm." Then I'd walk into competing hotels, like the Halekulani. I would get a call from the Halekulani, "What were you doing at our hotel, Mel?" (laughs) You know, that kind of stuff.

**PR:** Spy stuff (laughs).

**MK:** Yeah. Yeah. Anyway.

**PR:** So you mentioned to me why you decided to retire at 65, and I just found it a very simple approach to the rest of life. Can you share that?

**MK:** Sure. For most of your life, you plan. I mean, there's some things that come up that were not planned, like getting married, you know, etcetera. So I kept thinking, you know, why are you not taking the same approach to retirement? So my approach was, okay, you never know whether it's going to happen or not, but I'm going to die at age 85. My dad died at age 87. My mom died at age 72. But 85 is kind of reasonable in this day and age. So it's like, okay, let's say I'm going to die at 85. From 65 to 75, ten years. If you're in shape, then physically you should be able to travel, do whatever you want and go wherever you want, which is fine. And then from 75 to 85, genetics takes over. Because your body starts to wear down. You're older and you can't do as much as you want. I can remember my dad telling me, "You know, boy, I don't have the energy that I used to have. I can't do everything I used to do." You know, I remember that and I thought, Okay, so if I retire at 65, then I'll have at least ten good years of being able to do whatever I want. If I work to 75, then that may be gone and I won't be able to do things that I've always wanted to do and travel and everything else. So I was fortunate that I was okay financially to be able to do that. So I just said I'm going to retire at age 65. I gave out a two years notice, so we had transition plans in the place and all of that. So I did it and I had not---I'd been very happy with the decision. It took me about maybe four years to de-stress because I was working for 20 years as a lawyer, which means you never go on vacation. You're on vacation, but you're always on call. Outrigger, 18 years. You go on vacation, but you never really vacation because you're always on call, which is fine. My family got used to that. [Fire alarm goes off] When I retired, it was like, I don't need to be anywhere at any time or be under any pressure. But it took four years for that kind of that feeling to wash over my body where I could really kind of relax.

**PR:** Is that a problem?

**MK:** Fire alarm. [Interruption]

**PR:** So let's talk about Mel at Palama Settlement.

**MK:** Happy to do that.

**PR:** Over the years, you have saved us on many occasions. How did you happen to join the Palama board? Weren't you about 30 in 1978?

**MK:** I was 30 in 1978. And again, it's kind of like the old Hawai'i. I think back then, the Palama Board, as many nonprofit boards were staffed by people whose maybe spouses were business people or lawyers or architects in town. That's what it was, I think, in kind of the mid to late 70's. The reason I got involved was Eppy Kerr, who's the wife of George Kerr, who was one of the partners at my law firm, asked me if I would be interested in being on the board. I said Yes, absolutely.

Part of the reason for that is my family had a history with Palama Settlement. My grandparents had a rental home on Liliha Street, 1636 Liliha Street, which was one of six rental homes in a little lane whose front was really a Salvation Army building. It's maybe within two miles of here, where we sit today. I know my father's family all utilize Palama Settlement quite a bit so I've had some connection with Palama---when I was a kid, I was brought here by my one of my uncles. I was brought here by my dad when my dad was playing in a basket---442nd basketball league here. So I've been around Palama Settlement for a while. So it's a perfect opportunity to help an organization that my family had some connection with. So I think that was in 1978, and I said, Sure, I'd be happy to do it.

When we got here, there was some discussion that had already gone on about some physical improvements to the campus and being able to raise money in order to do that. I think we needed to raise about \$3 million dollars. In a nutshell, the physical changes were to move the iconic Rath building where we're sitting now from maybe the middle of the campus to the front of the campus. So it'd be right on Vineyard and to build a new building in between, the Rath building moved, and the other part of the campus where we had rental units as well as medical clinics. It was designed by Sid Snyder, who was a partner of Val Ossipoff, who was on the board at the time. So that's how it came to be that I came to Palama.

Then kind of the next step was the capital campaign that came up about how to raise, I think it was \$3 million dollars, and I got involved in that in kind of maybe a serendipitous way. I was on the board and there needed to be a new president and nobody seemed to step up to want to do it. I kind of looked around and I thought, number one, these people have been on the board much longer than I have---number one. Number two, they're older than I am, and I always respect my elders. So why aren't they doing it? You know, what's going on? But I didn't find anything other than maybe they didn't have time or the information to do it. So I was asked to do it and I said, "Sure, happy to do it." You know, young, dumb, not knowing anything (laughs). I was very young and it's like, wow, okay. So then we embarked on this couple campaign. It was then I really learned a lot about the aloha in the community for Palama Settlement. Because Palama Settlement, you know, this was back in the late 70's had been a part of this area for 80 years, essentially. So a lot of people had come and gone through here, including a lot of people that were fairly influential. So the chair of the capital campaign, honorary chair, was governor---then sitting governor---George Ariyoshi. He had his teeth fixed at the Strong Carter Dental Clinic. You know, and among a whole bunch of other things. The two chairs were John Bellinger, who was head of First Hawaiian Bank, and Bobby Pfeiffer, who was head of Alexander & Baldwin. So you've got three powerhouses chairing a capital campaign that it's---there's no way you're not going to make it right.

**PR:** I will add that those guys, those two, were cribbage partners of my father's.

**MK:** Ah, right.

**PR:** That helped.

**MK:** Yeah and your dad was---

**PR:** Bobby Rath asked (laughs).

**MK:** Yeah. Yeah. I'm sure---I mean, I know that played a big part in it. It was the first non-Jewish capital campaign to which Harry Weinberg gave a significant amount of money. I think he either gave a half a million or \$1,000,000 and it was obviously big money back then, but it was the first time he had given to a non-Jewish charity, is what I was told. I don't know whether he'd done the

war yet with A&B [Alexander & Baldwin] in his green mail campaigns. But yeah, that was significant. So we made the money and in what was a difficult time. So I don't know if you remember '80, '81, '82---I think it was in '82, the interest rates were over 20%. So it was a real down time in the economy. You couldn't buy a house because you couldn't finance it. I bought a house in '80, around '80. I had to buy an agreement sale because there's no way I could borrow money at 20%. That's crazy. So it was a difficult financial time but we did it and the physical work got done, we had a beautiful campus. Everyone was happy. So that was great. So it was an interesting time for me. I was just the young punk lawyer (laughs) and I got to meet some of the most influential people in town through that experience. So I was very honored to be a part of it. I think that term limits were like 12 years at the time, X number of terms, then you have to wait a year. So I think I did the 12 years, waited, and then I came back again in the 90's sometime. I mean, you have records of that, but I remember spending a lot of time at Palama.

**PR:** That was for the Centennial. I'm pretty sure you were on the board during the Centennial.

**MK:** I don't know. I'm at an age where I don't remember much anymore, Paula. (Laughter).

**PR:** I don't think that's true at all. Then just a few years ago, you stepped up again to help our real estate committee and our board---try to help look at our campus and see if we're really utilizing our campus to the best of our ability.

**MK:** Yeah, I got a call from Jackson Nakasone who's a good friend, fellow Okinawan, who said that Palama was looking at redeveloping the property and if I would help, I said, "Absolutely, I'd be happy to help." So we underwent a bunch of meetings and different exercises, one of which was actually working with a company called Lendlease, which is one of the largest real estate companies in the world out of Australia. They came up with the development plan, which would over densify, I guess, our campus. High rises that wasn't acceptable to the board, so we didn't do that. But it was good exercise because it focused us on what we thought the programs were not then and into the future and focus us on how much square footage we would need in order to do that. So it was a good exercise and I understand maybe some of that's going on again. When we did the exercise, we made it clear that it's really hard to predict out into the future because programs change, because your needs change, because your population changes. So if you can plan for five or ten years, you're doing pretty well. And you always sort of think about flexible space that you build because whatever is going to go in there now, it's not going to be ten years. It's going to be something different.

**PR:** We've got two buildings that will be 100 years old next year.

**MK:** Yeah.

**PR:** We really, really need to look at them. Let's talk about the whole idea and sensibility of safety. Safe is a word that comes up time and time again in these oral histories. People say that they came to Palama because they felt safe here or that Palama was the safe place for them in their life. What does safe mean to you? And are there things that you think we might do additionally to make people feel safer here?

**MK:** That was one of the discussions we had with Lendlease about how to make this place safer and they were thinking more in physical terms of barricade, boundaries, how do we check people as they come in and control that? It's especially relevant these days with school shootings and other incidents. My own view is that it's impossible to do that. You can do it to some extent, but there's no way you could check every single person that comes in here. There's no way, if people want to get in here with guns there's no way you're going to really keep them out. It's unfortunate, but that's

just kind of the way it is now. The only way you can, you can keep a place safe---quote, unquote, I think---is to know who's coming in and to build a sense of community where people value what we have here at Palama to the extent that they're willing to sacrifice to defend it.

I was asked this question just yesterday about a school whose board I sit on, and I told that person, that school has pretty good perimeter boundaries, so we can figure out, to the extent that we can, who comes in and who comes out. So we can defend against that pretty well. But more important is who's in the school? The students themselves. The only way they're going to protect against that is to know the students themselves. The only way you're going to do that is really know the students. The school has a really good counseling department. I can tell you from personal experience that they know the kids well. If a kid is doing odd things, the counselors will call parents right away and say, "Hey, what's going on at home because there's something going on that's not---your kid's acting strange." They do that. So the same thing at Palama, you got to know who's coming in here to the extent that you can and if something changes, try to figure out what's going on at home. But just try to build that sense of community, which I think for Palama was very difficult because of the nature of the population that you're serving. You know, the area has always been one that serves the most recent immigrants and the ones that are least financially capable. It's always been kind of a stepping stone to a better, better financial future, better education. Right now, it seems to be primarily Micronesians. I helped build a homeless village called Kahauiki Village, which is not far from here.

**PR:** Bravo.

**MK:** Yeah. We tried to initially be sure that we had a wide range of ethnicities so that we wouldn't build a ghetto. But it turned out in the end that there were many more Micronesian families that were on the verge of homelessness or being homeless that we had to abandon that and it's mostly Micronesians now at Kahauiki. Every ethnicity has different characteristics. It seems that one of the Micronesian characteristics---and I know this is a generality that is hard to say sometimes---but they don't take care of the kids as much as other ethnicities do, they just let them go without much supervision. If that's really the case at Palama, and if Micronesians have a majority of the population that comes here, then, you know, this is something that has to be taken into consideration about the kind of care that you need for the kids that are coming or even the parents to do something, adult education. This goes back to safety. You got to know the clientele, and then try to figure it out because if they can have a sense of ownership of this place, then they'll protect it. So that if there's somebody coming in that doesn't look right, or they suspect he's carrying a weapon, then have them be your police force and say, "Hey, what's going on?" And that's what a community is for. That's what we were trying to build at Kahauiki, is build a community. We're not trying to build public housing, where anybody can come, anybody can---we want a community like the old days where somebody's kid is acting up and say, "Hey, knock it off, or I'm gonna tell your parents." That's what you want in a community where everyone takes care of each other.

**PR:** Is that working there?

**MK:** It's working. It's working to some extent. I can't tell you it's perfect. But I'll give you an example. When we first started, we had a first phase of 30 units. We have a strict no drugs policy. There are obviously people that used to be on drugs that came in. In the first year, five people, five families left out of the 30. One was because they went to move in with some relatives in California. The other four were druggies and they were outed by the other residents because the other residents don't want druggies as their neighbors because of the potential effect on their kids. So they police themselves, which is what we want. It's unfortunate that there were four, but, you know, that's just the way it is. It's a hard thing to overcome. So if you can help build a community within Palama, that's kind of what you want. To me, the only way you're going to keep it really safe, is to self-police and it's going to be that neighborhood, that community. But that then involves staff. You

need to have staff that tries to foster that community, which is not easy now because---I don't know what the situation is at Palama, but people don't seem to hold jobs for very long, so they don't have the community, you have to have people who have some length of service. But that's again, just from the outside looking in, it's my view of how to do that.

**PR:** Do you have any thoughts on programs that you've seen work elsewhere that you think we might approach? We have been successful with our Training Table and we need to raise money to have that five nights a week instead of two or three, maybe seven nights a week, because our kids don't get fed---

**MK:** You know, I think sometimes Palama undersells itself. Palama has a great history, thanks to your ancestors. It has great aloha in the community, and I think people are quite willing to help Palama if they had a menu. You can say, you could help in these ways. You know, money for Training Table, computers, video, you know, whatever. But I think you'd find that there's a tremendous amount of goodwill that you can tap into. Again, I'm coming in from the outside. I'm coming in cold and I don't know what's going on literally right now. But when I was helping with the potential redevelopment of Palama, we kind of got into what are the programs---and so this is about five years old---what are the programs? What do you see coming up? You know, who your population is. You kind of have to figure out what kind of programs you want and then go raise money for it. I think---I know money's out there and I know you can raise more money for whatever the programs because this is where it happens, you know, Kalihi-Palama. Everybody knows that. If you want to help people, this is where you come, because this is where the people need help the most. I look at the areas of education. Most people believe that if you have better education, you've got a better shot at a better life. So helping the kids with their homework, with the training table, with education, in videography, computer science, you know, robots, something like that, in tech, that can definitely help them get a leg up. I point to what happened at Sea Rider Productions out in Waianae, when they came up with this brilliant video program that's being used commercially. You know, can you think of---back in the old days, it's like, Waianae? Are you kidding? But now it's like, hey, it's a model program. So all of a sudden you've got these kids growing up, they've got a future in something that's in demand these days. Why can't we do that at Palama? If they can do it, we can do it, right? I mean, and we've already have---like you said, robotic programs. We have some IT going on. So that's great, that kind of stuff. The parents need help, too. But I also understand we have some help, some education programs for parents that need either general education or help in navigated through governmental programs that they may need, so they need help in---

**PR:** We have them. We offer them. But getting them to come has been really, really difficult.

**MK:** Yeah. It's one of those things where people don't---people are hesitant until there's one or two that become the bell cows and they bring other people here. It's not easy. That I know. But it's essentially trying to figure out what the community needs and trying to have the programs to help them, and then having the leadership that's able to convert believers into money. If you have people out there that believe in Palama and believe in the programs and have money to give, why not give it to Palama? Again, this is my own personal view that Palama is leaving money on the table. You know, there's money out there.

**PR:** We get forgotten.

**MK:** Yeah, right. Yeah.

**PR:** With your long view of Palama, how have you seen Palama change the social politics of our community? Have you seen us influence in some way?

**MK:** No (laughs). I think---I think Palama's a resource, you know, and the number of kids and adults that come through here is a lot and who knows what---how you've helped people, but you definitely helped people. You know, and it's one of these things that I don't know how you do it, but I'll give you an example. At Kahauiki, we wanted to do a longitudinal study of the residents and do it over like 20 or 30 years to see what happened. People moved in. Their kids are here. They went to school, they went to college or whatever. Where did they end up? Was it beneficial that they lived at Kahauiki? I think we contacted the School of Social Work at the UH to help us with that. I don't know where it went. IHS is running the place now, but that was one of their ideas. I think it's, you know, if we can engage the School of Social Sork at the UH or somebody else, you know, that has--that has longevity and is willing to keep a program like that going for decades. You know, I think we'd find interesting things. And I think anecdotally, you know, you know that over the years, like George Ariyoshi, you know? We talk to---I mean, there's so many people that rose to high positions that have come through Palama and if you ask them, they will tell you, yes, Palama was very important in my life, but they don't get asked. You know, that's just---I think---I think there's a lot here that we haven't capitalized on and I'm not throwing darts or anything, but it's just an observation. You know that---

**PR:** Yes.

**MK:** ---that we've done much more good than people realize and people know.

**PR:** And when we do make ourselves visible, they do step up and COVID was a really good example of that. We had to shut down our programs, basically. But what we could do was we could feed people. We fed 400 families a day. I think it was 10,000 people who drove through our campus to pick up food. We had as much as we needed from companies bringing us food.

**MK:** That's wonderful. Yeah.

**PR:** It was proof positive that when we're needed, we will step up.

**MK:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. It's hard. Part of Palama is to be humble. But part of Palama needs to be---needs to tell people what to do.

**PR:** We're trying to best use social media. We're pretty prominent on Facebook and Instagram and YouTube. Some YouTube. But overall, I do think it's really, really easy for us to get lost and forgotten, and we just have to keep at it. The fourth generation of Raths is trying to help. My niece, Heather Rath, who lives in Hilton Head, South Carolina, is on our marketing committee, and she's a whiz at a couple of things. When she first started with us, she was a whiz at social media. But now she's also a whiz at getting federal grants. And that's what she's doing. She's kind of segued into lobbying for grants. So I'm hoping that she's going to really be able to help us. So you were president of Palama during our last capital campaign, and we are heading into another capital campaign, I think. I don't think we can do it this year. We've been talking about it for a few years, but these have not been good years to do it. But I think maybe '24 is going to be the year that we do this. Do you have advice for our board on how to work a capital campaign to its best advantage? I know that in the day when you were working on it and you were president in Palama, we had the big five and the leadership was very clear. I feel like it's more difficult now and I feel like Paula Rath certainly isn't Bobby Rath, you know, I mean, he had so many connections that he could bring. Advice? Do you have any advice for us?

**MK:** Well fundraising now in 2023 is very different than it was in decades past. And it's a real profession now, it's very analytical and so you really need a professional to help you because they

can---they'll do feasibility studies, they'll figure out where the connections are or where to start for your big gifts and why. So it's a totally different animal from what it was in decades past. So that's all I would say is to the extent that other board members have been involved in fundraising before, bring that experience in. I think you're going to have to find professional help to guide the whole process. It will make your job a lot easier. Everybody's trying to raise money right now. We have maybe less money around. You know, the Weinberg Foundation doesn't give as much as it used to. The Ching Foundation has blown a lot of its wad and it measures what it gives a little more carefully now. On the other hand, there are others that pop up that you need a special connection to in order to get them to give you money. But Palama, again, there's a storied history. If you find the right button, monies will come. So again, I don't know who's on the board, but you need to have those connections. That is true from time immemorial. So if you have the right people, it won't be hard.

**PR:** Well, I think we're being told there's more federal money, too. There's a lot of federal money.

**MK:** Yeah. But even that I mean, I think there's a lot of federal money because of what happened with the pandemic. But I think that's going to be drying up slowly, if not quickly. I think that the fact that we have a \$31 trillion deficit that's going to force the government to spend less money as well into the future. Longer term view, you just can't keep spending money the way we're doing. Yeah, but, Governor, Ariyoshi is still alive? So he could be the honorary chair again.

**PR:** (laughs) He could be, couldn't he?

**MK:** Yeah, and he's still pretty potent. So, you know, they make use of your resources, and he might be able to tell you, "You know, blah blah blah," it could help us to.

**PR:** Can help us, yes.

**MK:** He has access to Japanese money, too, so, you know, it's a resource. You may as well reach out. I mean, maybe it doesn't end up doing anything. But for the most part, he's well respected in the community.

**PR:** Well, we certainly have a lot of decades of thanks to give you.

**MK:** Happy to have done it. Happy to continue to do it. I'm a phone call away. If Palama ever needs help with anything, you know, I've always said I'm happy to help in any way that I can. This is a special place. Absolutely. No question about it.

**PR:** Thank you so much, Mel.

**MK:** You're welcome.