

# In Remembrance: Chris Iijima

Eric K. Yamamoto\* & Jason Iokona Baker\*\*

He had that gruff growl . . . and yet spoke the kindest words right into you. He had the fiercest lash against injustice . . . and yet caressed the spirits of all those in his orbit in that generous, humble way of his.

He was bred, educated, and experienced in the hardstreets of New York City . . . and yet became a Hawai'i local boy—through his music, the local grinds, his sensitivity to the justice struggles of multicultural immigrants<sup>1</sup> and Native Hawaiians, and his deep love for the law school's Pre-Admission Program and respect and affection for every one of his students. He would write an incisive law review article about the dangers of abusive presidential power in the name of civil liberties<sup>2</sup> while also composing a lyrical song about the feathery healing "Tuahine Rain" of Manoa Valley.

This to and fro, strong and gentle, there and here, is Chris Iijima—our Chris.<sup>3</sup> Of course, there's so much more. Everyone knows, how deeply in every bit of his being he loved Jane (his "rock") and Alan and Christopher (he was so proud of his boys and happy that they were doing well at the University Lab School). Many do not know he grew up in black Harlem, with visionary social justice activists parents Tak and Kazu, was a singer, composer and guitarist in the path-forging Asian American folk group *Grain of Sand*—or that he once sang a duet on national television with John Lennon (yes, the Beatle). For a full and rich description of Chris' political and musical life and times, I encourage your reading of Phil Nash's remembrance.<sup>4</sup>

But there is something else about Chris that is not written about, something that is ours, special just to each of us. Maybe that boost in sagging confidence.

---

\* Professor of Law, William S. Richardson School of Law, University of Hawai'i, in remembrance of Chris for his students and for Jane, Alan, and Christopher.

\*\* J.D. William S. Richardson School of Law 2006.

<sup>1</sup> Chris served for many years on the Board of Directors of Na Loio, Hawai'i's immigrant justice advocacy group.

<sup>2</sup> Chris Iijima, *Shooting Justice Jackson's "Loaded Weapon" at Yasr Hamdi: Judicial Abdication at the Convergence of Korematsu and McCarthy*, 54 SYRACUSE L. REV. 109 (2004).

<sup>3</sup> Chris joined the faculty of the William S. Richardson School of Law, University of Hawai'i, in 1998, as the Director of the Pre-Admission Program. Prior to joining the faculty he was an Assistant Professor at the Western New England Law School and taught in the New York University Law School's Lawyering Program. Immediately upon graduation from the New York University Law School, he clerked for the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York and then worked for a law firm in New York City.

<sup>4</sup> Phillip Taijitsu Nash, *Remembering Chris Iijima*, ASIAN WEEKLY, Jan. 11, 2006, available at [http://news.asianweek.com/news/view\\_article.html?article\\_id=cb54893525548182c6ca56a746f8775c&this\\_category\\_id=169](http://news.asianweek.com/news/view_article.html?article_id=cb54893525548182c6ca56a746f8775c&this_category_id=169).

Or the change in life direction (his voice: “why are you doing that?!” (question mark, exclamation point). Or growing close as a genuine sharing group through his study sessions, with *ono* food. Or reading and arguing about what is right and just in a complex world. Or hearing him as a conscience of the faculty. Or just plopping down exhausted in his office couch for some tender loving care, and rising an hour later that much lighter in spirit.

Iokona Baker’s spoken words illuminate this special feeling:

On the very first day Chris sat us all down and posed to each of us a single question: “Why are you here?” It was a complex difficult question, one all of us have struggled to answer over these past three years. Chris asked it on the first day. But that question was typical of Chris. He was an intense person who was committed to bringing out of students that which was buried within.

That group was the incoming 2003 Pre-Admission class, and that moment was the beginning of an enduring friendship we have nurtured. Chris was respected and loved by many but it was his hard work and dedication as the director of our Pre-Admission program that Chris was most admired for. The program admits and supports students from historically underserved communities with great promise as lawyers and community leaders. Chris embraced this program with all his heart and he gave this school and his students absolutely everything that he had.

I spoke with Chris in October of 2005, just months before he passed away. I had gone, with a few other students, to visit him at the hospital. Chris, who had been courageously fighting sickness for three years, was suddenly enlivened and animated when he saw us he immediately resumed his role as teacher, informing and inspiring us to seek justice, to make this law school, this state, and indeed the world a better place.<sup>5</sup>

So, in a quiet moment, when we at the law school let our thoughts flow, as Iokona did, we sense that special part of Chris within us. And it is that part of him within that nurtures, that helps us grow toward who we want to be and helps us see how we can act together in giving something special to our communities and beyond.

On a Sunday in January, in a little black lava cove off of Kealakekua Bay, Kona, beneath *keawe* trees and a light breeze, food on the picnic bench, a friend brought out two guitars. At first my hands were tired, my voice shaky—not feeling it. And then in a quiet moment, I remembered hanging with Chris and Jane and the boys and parents and his sister Lynn in an open air beach house, beneath *keawe* trees, in south Kohala, watching turtles, eating, laughing—just loving being there. And I recalled too, talking with Chris two

---

<sup>5</sup> Jason Iokona Baker, 2006 Graduation Commencement Speech at the William S. Richardson School of Law (May 15, 2006) (quotation slightly edited).

weeks earlier, the night a few hours before he lost consciousness, about his deep affection for Hawai'i and our law school (and our dean) and his faculty colleagues and students. We shared, he said, as wounded warriors—from jointly organizing the national Asian American Law Professors conference in Kahuku,<sup>6</sup> to the awesomely *ono* Side Street's braised Thai *poke*, to golfing in Makaha Valley—the richness and fragility of life. He was still “hoping for a miracle,” but at peace.

So as the sun set in Kealakekua Bay on that Sunday, I realized Chris would have loved just being there too—playing, singing, laughing, talking story. Indeed he was. And that feeling for the music returned.

And so our dearest friend and colleague Chris, each of us in our own way feels your call to justice and your music for life and gives it right back to you—with love and aloha.

---

<sup>6</sup> Pono Kaulike Me Ke Anuenue, “Justice and the Rainbow,” Joint Conference of The Asian Pacific American Law Faculty and the Western Regional Law Teachers of Color, June 2000.

