

Interview About Mary Choy with daughters Patti and Shelley



Mary Whang Choy
Photo courtesy of the Choy family

Mary Whang Choy, the wife of prominent Korean-American physician Duke Choy, was a Honolulu socialite actively involved in her church, who became a community activist. She was arrested in Kalama Valley on May 11, 1971, protesting the eviction of farmers and Native Hawaiians. Her arrest in Kalama Valley raised eyebrows, but lent dignity and legitimacy to a group of young Kokua Hawaii activists struggling to bring attention to social injustices. She served on the steering committee of Kokua Hawaii. She was an organizer of the 1993 Kanaka Maoli Tribunal, established to pass judgment on participants of the 1893 overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy. Choy was born on September 20, 1918, and died on March 14, 1997, of cancer. She was survived by her husband, Duke, and their five children, Diane, Peggy,

Glenn, Patrice (Patti) and Shelley. In August 1998, Mary Choy was honored as a “Fallen Warrior” at a Kanaka Maoli commemoration on the Iolani Palace grounds along with other deceased native and non-native activists. Two of her daughters, Patti and Shelley, who often accompanied Mary in her work as an activist, were interviewed by Gary Kubota on November 30, 2016, at Zippy’s Restaurant in Kalihi.

GK: Good morning, Patti and Shelley. Many thanks for granting this interview about your mother, Mary Choy. Where was Mary born and who were her parents?

SC: She was born in San Francisco. Her parents fled their hometown of Sinuiju, at the northern border of Korea and China during the Japanese occupation. The Japanese police were looking to kill her father, Whang Sa-sun, because he was part of the underground independence movement. At the time of their escape, Mary’s mother, Chang Tae-sun, was pregnant with Mary’s older brother Paul. They disguised themselves as Chinese to get over the border into China, walking across the half-frozen Yalu River, then took a train to Shanghai, and then sailed to San Francisco.

PC: When they arrived in California in 1913, my grandfather was not able to work as a schoolteacher as in Sinuiju. He took whatever work he could find—as a houseboy, picking tomatoes, eventually opening a laundry and cleaning service on Polk Street in

San Francisco. By night, he continued to organize for Korea's independence, as a member of the Sinminhoe, also known as the "New People's Society," one of the first nationalist organizations in the U.S., along with patriot Ahn Chang-ho and his own brother, Whang Sa-yong.

SC: Then he eventually became a reverend in the Korean Methodist Church in San Francisco. Chang Tae-sun also worked in the laundry, and she would tirelessly cook for the congregation, and host many a visitor and new immigrant families. My grandmother died when my mom was five. My mom said, "She died of exhaustion." My mom had two siblings—her sister, Elizabeth (El) was three years older and her brother, Paul, the eldest. When their mother died, her father was so grief-stricken that he asked his younger sister, Whang Hae-soo, to bring the two girls to Honolulu where she was already working as a social worker. The plan was that once he was over with his grief, he would send for the girls. She took the girls in as her own. They never returned to their father in San Francisco.

PC: So we grew up calling Whang Hae-soo, our great-aunt, "Tutu." My mother called her "gomo." That means "aunt" in Korean. "She was both our mother and father," as my mom would say.

GK: What kind of education did your mom receive?

SC: Mom graduated from Roosevelt High School, then known as the "standard English high school," then eventually went to the University of California-Berkeley where she majored in music—studying piano, conducting, and learning how to play all kinds of band instruments. She taught music to high school students in Hawaii. She was the type who could sit down at the piano, see the music, and play it.

PC: She had a sensitive touch and had a musical flow to her playing. We grew up listening to her play classical composers like Bach, Chopin, and Mendelssohn. She particularly loved records by Russian pianists, especially Vladimir Horowitz playing Chopin and Sviatoslav Richter playing Rachmaninoff, and would listen with her eyes closed. She could sight-read well, and had musicality. She was choir director at the Korean Methodist Church for many years, and often played the organ as well. She also directed our children's



Daughters Patti and Shelley Choy

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choir. When she stood before us holding our attention right before we began to sing, she would look at us and always break out into this wonderful smile, showing she believed in us. She sometimes chose unusual music for our children's choir. I remember that some of the pieces had unconventional harmonies. She showed independence in her choices, exposing us to new sounds without our being conscious of this. She was well-loved by the adult choir—I remember her joking with the members like Stan Kim, who had a great sense of humor. There was a mutual warmth and respect among them all. She was always prepared, organized, and clearly showed leadership with a light touch.

She was really versatile in many ways. She loved the arts, theater performance, music, dance and Korean culture. She not only played classical music records, but introduced us to Broadway musical recordings as well.

I believe she was one of the first non-Korean nationals in Honolulu to discover Korean dramas on TV in the early 1980s. Mom always tried to get me to watch a drama with her. She kept telling me she didn't understand a word of the dialog, no English subtitles at the time, but through the grainy black-and-white film, with very little sense of cinematography, she discovered what she thought was superb acting and the expression of deep feelings and emotions. She was right! I sat next to her in raptured silence, as we soaked in our own interpretations of what was being acted. She got me hooked. Her flexibility and openness could take her from watching a Korean drama to then leaving to attend a Hawaii socialist meeting.

GK: (Laughter) It seemed that whenever I saw her at events, I frequently saw both of you. I thought that was really cool in terms of exposing her children to a broad range of ideas.

SC: She constantly exposed us to the arts. She had been exposed to the performing arts through Tutu. At the YWCA on Richards Street, Tutu produced and directed large public Korean cultural pageants and plays involving both youth and adults. Mary and El were always involved, gaining exposure to their heritage.

PC: Mom was always quietly proud and enthusiastic about her Korean roots. She absorbed this pride from Tutu, and I think she passed this sense of pride down to us. Tutu would costume everyone in the YWCA productions in traditional dress, employ Korean musicians and teach dances, while informing the Honolulu community about Korean cultural traditions and celebrations, such as the Korean lunar celebration, Dano.

While she loved culture, she would express her love of nature as well. I remember in high school, mom was in bed reading the morning paper about a big winter storm coming with huge surf forecasted to roll in. She announced, "Let's go see!" So, instead of going to school, she took us out to Waimea Bay in the early morning. The waves got bigger as the day went on. We stayed there into the late afternoon to see 35-foot waves pounding the shoreline. The next morning we read in the paper that the waves crashed across the highway. An unforgettable experience. That's how her mind worked. She really loved the

aina. Wherever she drove us, she was always pointing out the beautiful sky, a great tree, a wonderful cloud, or the mountains. I thought she was pretty well-rounded.

SC: One thing about mom is that she was always so interesting to listen to. She was always delving into some new topic of interest or world event. I would just relish listening to her. She was so excited about joining the women in Halawa Valley and hiking to the water source in the mountains with Marion Kelly. I also remember her recounting the story of having to make her own rakusu, the Zen Buddhist vestment that students had to hand-sew when they took jukai, the Buddhist vows. She had a difficult time with it, but finally succeeded with the help of her hairdresser. We, her kids, were incredulous when she told us how our neighbor's pit bull dog, Sinbad, viciously attacked our sweet dog Halla. Mom ran out and put herself between Halla and Sinbad and miraculously was able to single-handedly pull the big bad dog off of Halla. What an image!

Mom had a joie de vivre (joy of life) and could be very spontaneous. Like how she was dancing and grooving at the Maple Leaf Bar in New Orleans, trying to egg on her lumps-on-a-log kids to join in. We didn't. We always talk about that because it was a good example of how she was always in the lead.

PC: She loved to read, reading voraciously and widely. She enjoyed light and entertaining novels and howled with Glenn over Art Buchwald cartoons in the *Saturday Review*. She got absorbed in Martin Buber, Norman Cousins, Paul Tillich and existentialism. Later she studied political history and ideologies, reading Marx, Mao Zedong, and many books on Buddhist thought including books by Yamada Koun, Robert Aitken, Thich Nhat Hanh, and the Dalai Lama. Her last area of study was learning the Hawaiian language. She was truly curious, always digesting, questioning and analyzing what she read, like she was trying to understand the truths of the world politically, culturally, and emotionally.

An example of how she worked to expose us to different things is when we were really young, a Danish gymnastics team came from Denmark to do an exhibition at Punahou Gym. And she said, "Oh, we must go." She said we had to take advantage of a unique opportunity.

GK: What prompted Mary to become a social activist?

PC: We all think growing up with Tutu as her strong role model, an independent female head-of-household, and along with mom's innate sense of empathy and principles made it pretty easy for her to evolve into working on social justice issues.

Tutu was the first Korean to graduate from Athens Female College (now Athens State University) in Alabama. She never married, never wanted to marry, and was the sole breadwinner for her little family by working as a social worker. We think Tutu's activities were linked to why my mom got involved with what she did. Tutu worked in the Korean community and conducted house visits to Korean immigrant families with domestic problems. From a young age, my mom was exposed to people and their social issues and

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she remembered these visits with emotion. When Tutu made house calls, our mom and her older sister Elizabeth, as little children, would go with her, because no one was around to take care of them at home. My mom and El would wait in the car and sometimes witnessed violent domestic disputes inside the homes, or if they didn't go on a house call, they would wait at home for hours, worrying about where Tutu was.

SC: One of Tutu's important thrusts was working with picture brides.

PC: She worked with not only Korean picture brides; there were Filipino and Japanese picture brides as well. Because of being exposed to many ethnic groups and their social issues through Tutu's work, it was easy for her to meet new people and she had so much compassion for most of the people she met! I think she developed that sensitivity as a child when she and her sister had to go on late night house calls with Tutu, who would mediate domestic issues in immigrant families. Through Tutu's work, mom was exposed to not only culture and the arts, but to the social and economic issues faced by immigrants from diverse ethnic groups.

SC: Another unique quality my mom had, that might be related to Tutu's social work influence and her spiritual evolution, was the ability to concern herself outside of the family. I think sometimes in our culture, maybe particularly in our island Asian culture, oftentimes we tend to be very family-oriented, we do everything for the family, the family is paramount. While our mom was a fantastic mother and role model, she didn't fit the mold in that she was also very much engaged in actions and causes outside of the insular family. She could see and act beyond the family.

PC: In fact, she would get irritated and say the strong focus on family-first within our own extended family was "too much," and we had to consider people beyond blood relations.

GK: How did Mary get involved in Kokua Hawaii?

SC: We really think there was a progression of her self-awareness, her continual spiritual searching, alongside her deepening involvement in radical activism. She was raised a Christian. The Whang family had converted to being Methodists before leaving Korea. We were brought up going to the Korean Methodist Church on Keeaumoku Street every Sunday, under the leadership of Korean ministers Samuel Lee and then Harry Pak.

We would attend Sunday school before service. The adults would have study groups after church and that's where she read Tillich, Cousins and Buber. The first thing I think she publicly did was when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated.

GK: What happened?

SC: That was in April 1968. She took me to the candle light vigil at Thomas Square for Martin Luther King, Jr. That was like a really big deal for me too.

PC: Before then, there were many photographs in the newspapers of mom as a socialite. She really played the doctor's wife role, and my parents hung out in that doctors' society. They entertained a lot of visitors, friends and family. There would be big dinner parties, and we were required to come out and greet all the guests.

SC: She would always go to balls, lunches, fashion shows. (Shelley shows a newspaper story.) I remember this one.

GK: (Gary reads) "500 guests attended the gala party Friday evening. More than 700 on a sellout evening. Holiday Tiara Ball."

SC: Almost as many as your play *Legend of Koolau*. (Laughs)

GK: Yeah. (Laughter)

SC: She was the chairwoman of a fashion show.

PC: That was her life. She dressed up a lot for formal events.

GK: That sounds like an extreme change in lifestyle.

PC: Sure was! Big change, and it affected the immediate family in a positive way. I wonder if our dad had some anxieties, but in the end he would follow her lead! It also affected her sister and our dad's siblings. They were critical and afraid of her evolution as a radical. There were heated fights with her sister.

GK: Did you ever ask her what her friends thought?

PC: We didn't need to! But, yeah. She lost a lot of friends. The invitation to most events and parties stopped. People didn't contact her. It was really easy to see what was happening. Aside from friends disappearing, I remember some phone calls started coming in with people saying, "Communist. . . go back to where you came from. . ." And there were a few anonymous letters they received in the mail telling them off.

SC: Yeah.

GK: Of course, we were more fun.

SC: Yeah. (Laughs) She loved the young people. She would come home from meetings marveling about you guys! She told us about the discussions, the disagreements and the funny stuff that came up in the meetings. Then, my father and my mother left the Korean Methodist Church. They were like pillars in the church. I'm sure there was a lot of talk when they left.

GK: Why did they leave?

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SC: They eventually left because Harry Pak had departed, and the church pastor who followed, as well as the congregation, refused to become involved or take a stand against the Vietnam War. They attended Church of the Crossroads instead where Del Rayson was pastor. We remember people like Stokely Carmichael came to speak there. The Church also served as the AWOL sanctuary for soldiers. Both my mom and dad did draft counseling.

GK: What happened?

PC: Through the draft resistance and the anti-war movements, Mom met the Johnsons—Bette and Walter (a University of Hawaii history professor). She became really close to Bette. They would talk on the phone all the time. They shared a lot of time together working on benefit events and the newsletters that Bette wrote. I remember working with them to mail out the newsletter to quite a large anti-war mailing list. I think mom found Bette so refreshing and kind of exhilarating because she was direct, frank, funny, and, of course, knew the issues. Bette mesmerized me—that is for sure.

GK: The Johnsons were big supporters of Kokua Hawaii.

PC: Yeah. That's how her friendships evolved. She lost her old friends but gained new, cool friends! I even learned so much listening to the new conversations swirling around us. My parents formed life-long friendships with other radicals and activists—the Johnsons, Marion and John Kelly, Kekuni Blaisdell, Maivan Lam, Setsu Okubo, and Robert Aitken, who was a liberal Buddhist priest. The family was exposed to significant artists and activists like Phil Ochs, Pete Seeger, the Black Panthers and Angela Davis.

SC: I remember when I was in sixth grade, my parents decided not to pay their telephone tax, because the tax went to fund the war and all that. That was the first stand that she took. I think being Asian, she really resonated with the Vietnam War and the Vietnamese fight for self-determination.

GK: There were parallels between Vietnam and Korea?

SC: Right.

GK: Did she ever talk about the parallels?

SC: Oh, yeah, because her uncle, Whang Sa-yong, was a radical revolutionary, and she was proud of him. He was all about Korean independence. He, as well as her own father, Whang Sa-sun, were working for Korean independence while living in California. It was sad, though, that in his later years, Whang Sa-yong, came to Honolulu, and lived in Chinatown. We would visit him maybe once in a year. With awareness, she became proud of him, but only after his death. When he was still alive, there was a sense of shame about his radical life.

GK: Although Kokua Hawaii was community-based, helping to organize against evictions, one of the things we also did was support demonstrations against the Vietnam War. We supported expatriates like Maivan Lam who supported self-determination for Vietnamese people. It provided cross-education to community members. . . . If community members listened to 50% of what we said, or read our newspaper *the Huli*, that was good enough for me. So tell me, why did Mary decide to take part in the arrest and become a member of Kokua Hawaii?

SC: Patti remembers mom saying that she had to take a stand with the young people and for self-determination for the Hawaiian people. She was very clear about that. Mom single-mindedly acted on her convictions. She was constantly going to meetings, standing on picket lines, marching, protesting, showing up to support this group or that event. I got the feeling that just her presence at these events or even simply in the meetings was meaningful and inspiring to her fellow warriors. But, going back in time, she began to work at the University of Hawaii International Student Office, and a co-worker who was into Zen Buddhism introduced her to Kokua Hawaii. We had been to Kalama Valley and she was one of the supporters. She would take us to the valley. We would go out to the valley almost every day after school three weeks before the arrest. I think with that background, together with all her social-political concerns, she could see what was happening. She saw what was happening and she acted.

PC: We would hang out in the valley. She would bring food stuff. It's not like I had friends there. The Kokua Hawaii guys were older, but, again, through mom's work and exposing us to new stuff, we were able to be around new thoughts, new people, and hear stimulating conversations.

SC: We'd work in the garden with Kokua Hawaii member Al Abreu.

PC: I remember one day, we went to University High School, across UH campus in Manoa, like early afternoon, I was just wandering around near the cafeteria and suddenly, I see mom! (Laughter) I couldn't believe my eyes. She was dressed for a day out on a farm and she was looking for us!

GK: What was she doing?

PC: She came looking for us to take us out to Kalama Valley.

SC: (Laughs)

PC: So, she took Shelley and me and a bunch of our friends who could fit in our car. I'll never forget that. She took us out of school, off campus, without permission, and drove us out to the valley.

SC: I can't remember exactly what she did out in the valley. But I think just her presence there was enough actually to inspire the young people and to inspire her, because she

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was this establishment Asian woman. People would always say that, “Oh, your mom is so serene, so calm.” When we did go out to the valley, she liked to talk to people.

PC: It was a learning experience for her. She didn't go and feed the pigs and move slop pans or anything, I know that for sure. But that's what I thought was good about her. She remained true to herself and really practiced what she preached to us, which was, “Just be natural. Be yourself.” Once she got involved in all of these causes, she didn't try to be a Vietnamese or even a Korean. She didn't try to be Hawaiian. She didn't try to be local. She didn't try to be a Young Lord. She didn't take on a Hawaiian or even a Korean name! She was just herself.

SC: Kalama Valley was a landmark beginning in so many ways for so many people. For the Hawaiian people it was the beginning of emboldened self-determination. For our mother, it was also a bold step in her continual evolution.

GK: What happened on the day of the arrest in Kalama Valley?

PC: I remember we drove out because she said, “Okay, let's go.” Word finally came, “The bust is gonna happen.” So, she used a side entrance to get into the valley, because the main road to the valley was closed to everyone.

SC: And our dad went, too. He drove us out to the valley.

PC: He drove out early in the morning to drop her off for the bust. With our dad, we stood out on the roadside. We didn't know what was happening to you guys. But we saw the cop cars going in. And then before you know it, the cars were coming out with all of you.

GK: What about Mary?

PC: We saw our mom in one of the cars in the back seat. And she just waved. We waved. And then dad took us to school. And that was that. We didn't even think of going down to the police station or anything. No thought of bail money. One year ago, Annie Worth, a dear family friend, told us how she got the call that mom needed to be bailed out of jail! Annie got a parking ticket while she bailed Mary out of jail! It never ever dawned on me to think of how she got out of jail.

SC: (Laughs)

PC: It was just school as usual and I don't think I even talked about what happened when I went to school. (Laughter)

SC: You recall her waving. I remember she also put her fist up in the cop car.

PC: Yes, she put her fist up, too, because I remember seeing the flash of a handcuff through the car window. Kinda thrilling to think about!

SC: Yeah, in the cop car. That's what I remember.

PC: The entire occupation was such a huge learning experience for me! And, the trial!! That's where I really learned to not trust the system. Mom was given the biggest fine because the judge said she was the oldest person arrested and should have known better, or something close to those words. But you know what's kind of sad, too?

GK: What's that?

PC: I'm just thinking. We really lived untouched lives. We didn't live pig farmer George Santos' life. We had the luxury of being a supporter and going back to our cushy life.

GK: That's part of being a larger part of a social movement where you have all kinds of people from different social classes and ethnicities supporting a cause. I myself was living in a one-room boarding house and working as a busboy/waiter in Waikiki. That's why it's called a movement. She really never stopped fighting against injustices, participating in demonstrations against the eviction of Filipino residents at Ota Camp, the closure of Hale Mohalu for leprosy patients, Chinatown evictions, Waiahole-Waikane, and the H-3 freeway through Hawaiian sites in Halawa.

PC: Yeah, true.

SC: True.

GK: How was it at home?

SC: She would have yelling fights with not only her sister about the war, but even with our father. They were both hawks. Then, my father eventually changed.

PC: I remember telling my friends about my mom and dad's arguments at breakfast in the morning. And, they'd go, "About what?" I replied, "The war. My mom's so against it and my dad is for it." Then my friends said, "At least it's only that. Not like my parents. You're lucky. It's not like divorcing and being physically abused or something."

GK: Do you know what turned your father against the Vietnam War?

PC: We started going to the lectures. A lot of people were flying into Hawaii to talk about things. Movies were being shown. He started playing tennis with Walter Johnson, so maybe he had no choice, but to change after hanging with Bette and Walter. Of course, news reports were filled with pictures of GI body bags and mutilated Vietnamese bodies. Something clicked. He got it.

SC: He got into COR (Committee Of Responsibility), looking at the Vietnam War from a medical point of view and the effect of napalm on children. He assisted with forming a Hawaii chapter.

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PC: So, this committee of doctors from the mainland brought out Vietnamese children who were injured, but strong enough to travel to get medical help. . .

SC: . . . to Hawaii.

PC: I remember it was so hard to get local doctors to volunteer their services. But, Fred Dodge came forward. So, he and other doctors volunteered to work with the Vietnamese kids once they arrived in Hawaii. Man, it was such a shock to see these little kids in our house who were injured and had napalm burns. Up until then, we only saw photos in the newspapers and on the TV news of war-injured people. But, it was his first big commitment. He really had the guts to evolve, too.

SC: He quit the local chapter of the American Medical Association because its members would not come out against the war. He said as medical people, we have a responsibility. He worked to set up a free clinic in Chinatown.

GK: I know he had a free clinic in Ota Camp. What made him donate his services?

PC: That was because our oldest sister Diane asked him to do that.

GK: I remember Diane was a part of a radical group, Third Arm, helping tenants in Chinatown fight evictions as a result of urban redevelopment.

PC: Yes.

GK: Were Mary and Duke involved in any other activities?

PC: Both my mom and dad supported the Bachman Hall sit-in and the tenure fight of Oliver Lee who opposed the Vietnam War, and supported Maivan Lam throughout her UH discrimination case. They supported the setting up of the Ethnic Studies program at UH. Mom was active with the American Friends Service Committee, and worked on other international radical causes. She worked with Ron Fujiyoshi on the issue of fingerprinting of Koreans in Japan. She was active in the nuclear-free Pacific movement. She supported revolutionary struggles in Nicaragua and Peru.

I think through it all, the common thread for my mom was that she loved people and had so much compassion for the disenfranchised. As we were growing up, mom would invite international students to our house from countries such as Mexico and India. We remember Thanksgiving dinners, Christmas dinners where there'd be 30 people, almost all strangers. I remember asking, "Can't we have a dinner just with people we know, our family?" Up to the last minute, she would still be welcoming people to come over. I remember Rodney Morales, who associated with Kokua Hawaii and later became an English professor, spent many hours talking with my mother in our home. She and my dad were constantly inviting people over to the house. She loved meeting people. Her friends widely ranged in age, from different countries and cultures. I think her sense

of humanity showed through her support of the issues. She never wanted attention on herself; she was really humble. She would be curious and ask questions about others' lives.

When she worked with the committee that organized the Kanaka Maoli Tribunal, she volunteered to head-up the kitchen to provide what she hoped would be "nutritious, organic food for the participants." She was happy to be in the background and not be acknowledged. Yet, when she knew there was a demonstration for a cause she believed in, even if there were only a few people who showed up, she was unafraid to wave her sign and shout for justice.

GK: It seemed like she had a lot of empathy for people who were disenfranchised. How much of that might have been a personal reflection on her own life?

PC: Losing her mother at an early age probably had an impact and, again, growing up around struggling people of color and immigrants through Tutu's work.

SC: When she was sick with her cancer, I think that did come out. You know I'm thinking, she never talked about losing her friends, but I'm sure that really impacted her. She kept a lot in. She was not a complainer.

PC: She felt abandoned by her father, because he never called them back to the mainland.

SC: He didn't keep in touch with Mary and El. They grew up without their own father, not knowing him. So, I know that impacted her. And through her cancer, I think a lot came out for her to think about the past.

SC: I think another turning point in her evolution was the University of Hawaii's Ethnic Studies conference. Organizers brought in Juan Gonzales of the Young Lords, Carmen Chow of I Wor Kuen, and Kalani Ohelo of Kokua Hawaii.

PC: That was a landmark event for everyone. Mom realized how colonized she was. Even though that was a radical change of thought for her, she still maintained herself. She didn't try to be a super Korean and take on a Korean name.

GK: I remember Juan Gonzalez and Carmen Chow who also spoke at the conference. Juan is now on that national radio program *Democracy Now!* hosted with Amy Goodman. They spoke about the importance of developing educational programs that presented history from a minority point of view.

PC: Hearing Juan and Carmen radicalized mom and dad's views on education so that they were willing to take a stand with Ethnic Studies at the University of Hawaii. It was inspiring for the whole family when Juan and Carmen came to our house and met with Diane and the rest of our family in our living room.

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GK: Was there ever a time that she disagreed with the direction of Kokua Hawaii?

PC: I remember, one evening mom came home from a meeting and she was so upset! The big issue at the Kokua Hawaii meeting was (Chuckles), “Should we wear berets?”

GK: Berets?

PC: You know, berets like the Young Lords and the Black Panthers. And she and Soli were against it, but everyone else wanted the berets. It was so funny.

GK: That happened before my time with the group. So what happened?

PC: She said, “OK, if they get them, I’m not going to wear one.” And we said, “You don’t have to”.

SC: They did get them.

PC: The beige ones. She didn’t wear it. Our parents got involved in all this stuff, and we followed along. Whereas you guys, right, you young people had to chart the course, and battle with your parents. We had it so easy because they were on the cutting edge and all we did was follow.

GK: Well, everybody has their own path. Frankly, your path is not finished yet.

SC: It’s true.

GK: I was always amazed at the calm demeanor of your mother and her ability to take action.

PC: I think her Zen meditation helped her to kind of find a place where she didn’t care what people thought. She was just gonna do her thing.

SC: Right.

PC: And heck with all those criticisms and whatever.

SC: Yeah. I think the Zen training prepared her or developed her so that she could act. She converted to Buddhism in the early 1970s after leaving Church of the Crossroads. My father followed her to the Diamond Sangha in Manoa where Robert Aitken was roshi. But she already had a rather calm and graceful demeanor before this time. I think she was this way from childhood—calm and strong. She had her close friends and mentors from the time of her involvement with the Methodist church through her radical years. Those who seemed to be mutually supportive in a spiritual sense included Francis Lee, Tutu Ossipoff (mother of the Honolulu architect Vladimir Ossipoff), Harry Pak, and Robert Aitken. She was deeply inspired by the Dalai Lama. It’s hard to know where she got her strength and

fearlessness, her curiosity and openness to the new, but as we've said, Tutu was a strong presence in her life.

I think the overriding qualities mom had were empathy and humility. I think that's what, in large part, drove her actions. For example, during the Vietnam War, we would be sitting next to each other watching the news on TV, seeing all the body bags coming home, hearing the latest death counts, seeing the war images and video. It would make her cry, and I could just feel her anguish. It seems she was really identifying with the Vietnamese people and would often say, "They need their self-determination." She really felt for other people. In hindsight, she perhaps had too much empathy, took everything too much to heart, which may have not been the best for her health.

GK: Can you share some thoughts about her last phase of life?

SC: In later years, she said she was working on her "colonized mind." I remember driving with her somewhere, and too bad I don't remember the exact incident she told me about, but she said the incident made her realize what a colonized mentality she had. I paused and thought about what she said, and I thought, "Yeah, she's right!" So here was yet another way that she was educating me, while taking another step forward in her evolution.

Her death was as remarkable as her life. She was suddenly diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer and died 10 months later in our home. The whole time she only used Tylenol, even in the last, final stages. The night before she died, she asked us to call her Zen teacher, Aitken Roshi, on the Big Island. We dialed his number and held the phone to her ear. She asked him, "How do I let go??" He answered to go back to "Mu" (the mantra meaning nothingness.) She said, "OK!" and slammed down the phone, and went to it, her practice!

That same last night, I was sleeping on my massage table in the hallway outside her room, sliding doors open. She became extremely restless. I went to her and before I could say anything, she asked me, "Are you ok? Do you need anything?"

PC: She gave us all a huge gift to be with her as she confronted her cancer. At the time, she took us all on a new road, and, again exposed us to a new world. She and dad were into "alternative" health things like reiki, hypnosis, and acupuncture. She decided she was not going to go the traditional route and do chemo or radiation. No surgery. The doctors said that she could try chemo and radiation but it was probably too late anyway. She took a stand and accepted this. She was open to trying a different way. We met healer Ansara and other Kanaka Maoli healers during this time. Her death and dying process was relatively pain-free and she said the nightly hypnosis from dad was the reason.

SC: Yes, it was probably the combination of hypnosis from our dad, Reiki by Glenn, Biomagnetics and Healing Touch by Diane and me, and her Zen practice that helped her to cope with the disease and the pain.

Mary Whang Choy Interview

Her memorial was held at Church of the Crossroads. As I arrived at the church, parking in the adjacent lot, I noticed a SWAT team parked at the far end of the lot, along University Avenue—large black armored vehicles with large letters “SWAT” and more than several men dressed to the hilt in their black gear. They were kinda just standing there, waiting. Their presence was disturbing, menacing, shocking, funny, and sad, all at the same time. We didn’t know of any threats at the time, who knows why they were there. We thought, maybe it was because Bumpy Kanahele, whose group mom supported. He came early to pay his respects before the service started. Maybe, the authorities thought there would be unrest? Emotions were high? Who knows. But I thought mom would never believe that a SWAT team appeared at her funeral!

PC: Mom carved out her own way, like she did throughout her life, for her transition. She led the family on a new path to discover that death and dying is a natural process. She was in the lead from the start of her diagnosis. Two days before she passed away she announced that she was going to stop eating “as part of my transition.” On her last day, she announced she was “ready to take off” and gave away her last possessions, including dad’s old car! She refused the use of oxygen because “it is not natural.” She gave me a last instruction on how to take care of dad. She explained to her doctor, who stopped into visit, “Mentally I am fine, but physically my body is deteriorating.” So, we all got to say full words and good-byes to her. Peggy had a final telephone call from Wisconsin. She told Noa, her grandson, “I hope by tomorrow I will be liberated.” Early, the next morning, she told Shelley she was ready to go and to call Jennie and Annie. So, we all gathered with her and then she slipped onto a new life. Diane told her, “Go to the light.” About a week before she passed away, Glenn said to her, “So many people are telling me you are an inspiration to them,” and she said to our brother in a soft voice, “Inspire yourself.”

Mom agreed to begin hospice services the day before she passed away. The first visit by a nurse was scheduled for the next morning. She died about one hour before the nurse arrived. But, we thought, “That’s Mom! She had to do it her way!”

GK: Final thoughts on your mom and Kalama Valley?

SC: The occupation of Kalama Valley was a watershed moment, and she took that stand to support these young Hawaiian people as they said, “No more! This is our land, our livelihood, this is our way.”

PC: In committing to defending Kalama Valley, she stayed true to the values and beliefs she independently sought out and developed when she made a break from her old life 30 years before. She was always our teacher.



(Note: Mary’s daughter Peggy Choy helped to edit this interview.)