

# **AN INTERVIEW WITH WAYNE N. TANAKA**

An Oral History Conducted by Vanessa Concepcion, Kristel Peralta, Cecilia  
Winchell, Ayrton Yamaguchi, and Stefani Evans

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Reflections: The Las Vegas Asian American and Pacific Islander  
Oral History Project

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Oral History Project

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Produced by: The Oral History Research Center at UNLV – University Libraries  
Director: Claytee D. White  
Project Manager: Stefani Evans  
Transcriber: Kristin Hicks  
Editors and Project Assistants: Vanessa Concepcion, Kristel Peralta, Jerwin Tiu, Cecilia  
Winchell, Ayrton Yamaguchi

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The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of Reflections: The Las Vegas Asian American and Pacific Islanders Oral History Project.

Claytee D. White  
Director, Oral History Research Center  
University Libraries  
University of Nevada Las Vegas

## PREFACE



“Although our ethnic backgrounds varied (Hawaiian, Chinese, Japanese, Portuguese, etc.), we played together as friends after school and during weekends. Hawaii is known as the ‘Melting Pot of the Pacific’ due to the diverse cultures of its residents.”

When the beloved namesake of Wayne N. Tanaka Elementary School engaged in a virtual interview during the COVID-19 pandemic, the award-winning educator demonstrated why he is so highly regarded as an educator and as a spiritual and community leader. Recalling his childhood in Lahaina, Maui, Hawaii, he talks of his Japanese Hawaiian upbringing, his diverse community, his family's “no excuses” ethos, learning *hula*, and diving for coins tossed from tourist ships.

Recalling his parents and grandparents, he connects the individual with the national and international. He speaks respectfully of their separate pursuits of ministerial education and leadership in their Shingon Buddhist faith. He describes how his father, while detained in a World War II relocation camp in Hawaii, learned of his parents’ deaths in Japan during an American bombing raid. He memorializes his maternal grandfather’s labor on a sugar plantation and explains his maternal grandparents’ arranged marriage.

In this interview, Tanaka talks of the Japanese concept of *gaman*, “that indomitable spirit to continue in the harshest of times no matter what the situation,” which allowed him to continue

with his educational plan even after his mother's sudden death of in an automobile accident. He shares why he matriculated from Lahaina to the University of Utah, where he met and married his wife, Sadie, and where he obtained the education that brought him and Sadie to Las Vegas as new teachers in 1972. He explains his philosophy of education, developed over time and through family and life experiences, that animated and defined his career in the Clark County School District.

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March 12, 2021

in Las Vegas, Nevada

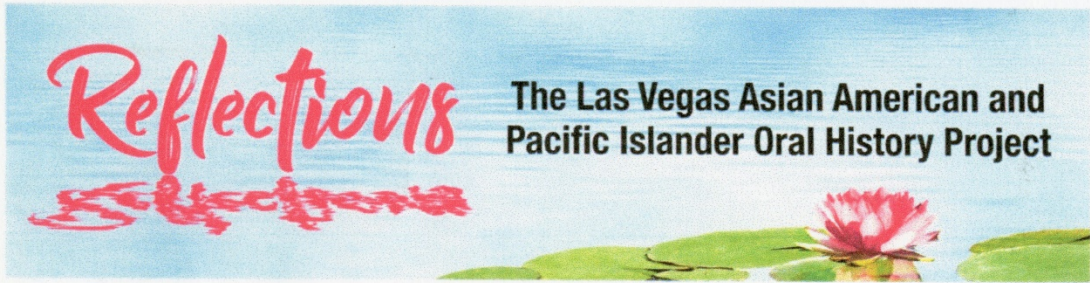
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**Good afternoon. Today is March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2021. I'm Stefani Evans. I'm here with our student assistants: Kristel Peralta, Ayrton Yamaguchi, Vanessa ["Nessa"] Concepcion, and Cecilia Winchell. We are here to interview Wayne Tanaka.**

**I'm going to ask you to please spell your first and last names for the recording.**

Wayne, W-A-Y-N-E. Middle initial N. And Tanaka is capital T-A-N-A-K-A.

**Thank you so much. Nessa, the floor is yours.**

**NC: Thank you. Let's start off by just talking about your family and your childhood and your parents and siblings, maybe where they migrated from and your journey to Vegas.**

Yes. I was born and raised in Lahaina, Maui, Hawaii. My father was a minister, first generation Japanese. My mother was second generation, born to first generation immigrants (*issei*).

Sometimes they would ask me if I was an *issei* or a *nisei* or *sansei*, and I used to wink and say, "Two-and-a-half *sei*," because of my generational skipping there with my mother's side. My mother spoke fluent English and fluent Japanese and could read, write and synthesize thought in both languages equally well. My father, as a Buddha minister, he mainly spoke in Japanese, but he did know how to read and interpret Sanskrit.

Part of his mission called for him to take...Buddhism has many sects, different kinds of...like Lutheran and Catholic and Protestant breakdown, Buddhists have the same kind of situations. My father was a Shingon minister, S-H-I-N-G-O-N, and was trained in a location they called Koyasan, K-O-Y-A-S-A-N. The location was chosen by the first person to bring Buddhism from China and India into Japan, so it's a title that they say...It's the one and only time they use the word "dai," D-A-I. They called him O Dai Sama. He was the one that first synthesized the Japanese language. He realized that many of the Japanese/Buddhists were uneducated, and so, therefore, where he located the temple was going to be very important.



There were eight mountains. He symbolically said there was a mountain for each of the eight noble paths. That was where my father was trained. He was essentially given to the church at age five and was ordained a minister by age twelve and then sent on his first mission by age seventeen, and Hawaii was where he was asked to go.

Now, on my mother's side, her father was very poor—well, impoverished, I should say—because by standards he was much like many of the population who were in farming; they were essentially poor and uneducated. He chose to travel to Hawaii and see if he could save enough money to go back one day and live like a king. That never happened. He then, after a number of years living just with other men who worked like him in the sugarcane plantations, started to put together a dowry, and that dowry was essentially monies given to a family that were probably equally impoverished. Because most of the people who came didn't speak English and were struggling to read and write, the ministers communicated from Hawaii to Japan about who this man really was; in many cases, it may have been exaggerated. The family in Japan with a daughter would have agreed to an agreement of marriage by essentially collecting the dowry and then sending their daughter overseas to Hawaii.

Now, in my grandmother's case, I don't know exactly what age she was, but I think the commitment was made starting when she was thirteen and was in Hawaii to marry by the time she was fifteen. Of course, I was kidding by saying to Stefani, after traveling by ship and getting seasick, I'm sure she wasn't exactly...she didn't look exactly like her picture, I guess, and so my grandfather had a real problem accepting her at the beginning. But she was much more courageous than you would think. She indicated if he sent her back she would throw herself overboard and her death would be upon him, so she was no pushover. Consequently, they went

to a warehouse, where a Methodist minister wearing a black hat, black vest, and Bible in hand pronounced them man and wife.

They threw her only carry-on belongings (I'm not talking about a travel bag or a knapsack, I'm talking about a bundle of clothing) onto the back of a wagon pulled by mules. The couples went to the camps where they had their hovels to begin their lives. My mother was the firstborn child of this union. They were not in a big city like Honolulu. They were on a peninsula on the big island of Hawaii near the Kohala Coast; the sugar plantation was the only job that was there for him. He and my grandmother birthed my mother and then two sons, Steven and Thomas, and later twin daughters, Matsuko and Takeko, and the final child, Doris. It's hard to believe this, but in one generation's time my mother, my uncle Steve, my uncle Thomas, and my aunts Matsuko and Takeko and Doris, all ended up college educated. That took everybody's commitment to do that. Many times it meant traveling to different islands to work in the canneries where there were jobs for women, and they did everything they could to save as much as they could to get themselves educated. Now, my father, when he married my mother (because she was the firstborn child), he also committed to assist her siblings' college education. Thus, part of his earnings went directly to help them become educated as well.

On my father's side, his parents died during WWII as a result of the bombing raids in Japan well before I was born. My father learned of his parents' deaths while he was in a relocation camp here in America. How he found out was through the International Red Cross. I did see a copy of the telegram that informed him of that unfortunate situation. In those days, of course, there was very little he could do. The remains of his parents were never located, but my father persevered. The Japanese word that we use is *gaman*, that indomitable spirit to continue in the harshest of times no matter what the situation and never saying, "Oh, poor me," but, "Why

not me?” My father had this real staunch outlook. I guess, even in my case and my brother’s case, after the death of our mother, we would acquire a college education. Does that give you an idea of who my parents were?

**NC: Yes.**

My father was a minister as well as the principal of a Japanese language school at the church. My mother was actually an elementary and high school teacher. She was also a public health nurse with a home economics degree, and so she taught midwives how to birth children at the same time that she was teaching the cafeteria workers how to produce nutritional meals for my generation of kids. She was also an ordained minister.



Wayne N. Tanaka, middle son and second-oldest child of his parents.



In the early '50s my older brother and I along with our younger brother were left to live with our grandparents for about two years, on Kohala. Our parents traveled to Japan for our mother's ministerial training in Koyasan. Our grandparents spoke very little English; sometimes he was vulgar and hers more dealt with everyday living, like *tamago*, translated to English meant "egg." I won't tell you my grandfather's crude language, but he was learning it from everybody else. He was carrying sugarcane on his shoulder and loading boats full of sugarcane, so he was kind of a rough-and-tough guy.

**NC: You mentioned that your father was in the relocation camps. Could you tell us more about that experience?**

Yes. It has to go back historically to Executive Order 9066. Now, that executive order essentially said that—well, they never said it, but we know the implication. We're guilty by reason of race. But my father never used it as a "pity me; I'm a victim" excuse. I'm just saying that there was wartime hysteria. The early *isseis* were not educated. They were struggling to make ends meet. That being said, they didn't have political moxie, so even if they objected to it, some of the Japanese organizations said, "You have to obey the law." Well, if you take the position that Executive Order 9066 was the law, that you're an American citizen, many decided they were going to follow the law despite losing everything. They couldn't depend on the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment, due process of law. They were not able to say, "Wait, wait, wait, you did not give me free speech."

There were actually cases of World War I veterans who, upon the day they were loaded upon the railroad cars, actually wore their medals and their ribbons and their American infantry uniforms, and as they boarded the train, saluted the soldiers loading them onto the trains. There are actually photos at the Japanese American Historical Museum of scenes like that. Of course, you're all knowledgeable that you could see tags hanging from the shirts and collars of little kids and elderly grandparents, some with canes. The excuse that they were possibly enemy aliens who were possibly a danger to the United States, in later years those fell short, because what harm could they possibly do as a two-year-old child? But, then again...

The hardest part is most of the people that suffer, I guess, overt and covert forms of racism are identifiable minorities. See, you can't shake how you look. You can straighten out your hair, you can curl your hair, you can change the hair color, but physically it's more difficult for Blacks, Latinos, and Asians to shake how they look other than marrying yourself out of existence. Anyway, that's how my father ended up...

Now, the strangest part about E.O. 9066 is before Roosevelt signed it, in California they had already incarcerated 1,783 Japanese Americans who owned boats and were fishermen off of San Pedro Island and Coronado Island. Within two days of the anticipated signing, they were already under arrest and their boats confiscated. The question comes, how did they know who they were? Ah, that list was already made. The implementation was done through the military. The military, working with civilian law enforcement, had already identified groups they felt were going to be detrimental to the United States, even after they [these same people] had gone in and signed loyalty oaths and decided that they were going to serve in the military. In Hawaii, of course, [Japanese Americans served in] the 100<sup>th</sup> Battalion, and on the mainland, the 442<sup>nd</sup> Regimental Combat team.

The funny part about—and I don't mean funny ha-ha—history can be strange when you retell the story. But if you think about it, they did not want any Japanese American soldier from Hawaii or the 442<sup>nd</sup> to be a company commander, a regimental commander. They didn't want anybody above the rank of—well, long story being told, when you look in the history, there were some captains and lots of sergeants, there were some majors. But the company commanders, they were not going to be Japanese, because the thought was, “They're going to shoot you from behind,” which goes back to the political side of things and how we were represented: buck teeth, slant eyes, mean, whips and swords. Now, the Japanese who bombed Pearl Harbor are not without guilt. What they did in China and Southeast Asia, Indonesia, Philippines—inexcusable. But to transfer what they were doing into a political statement about established American citizens without due process of law produced some of these dark, dark pages of history for us. That's why we also are very careful not to endorse hatred whether it's against Muslims or anybody looking Arabic. Then, with now the gates opening to migration, I don't know how

many times Ayrton might have been approached with somebody speaking Spanish right at him. He's laughing. I can't tell you, I didn't know I look Spanish, but there were times when I was in the state of Arizona that they'd start talking to me in Spanish. Thank God I had taken Spanish up until my third year in high school, so I was able to respond. But then when they got into real sophisticated conversation, I had to bring my ignorance and say, "Hey, I am so sorry, but I'm Japanese." And they'd say, "Haponese? You talk good for Haponese." I'm not trying to do the ethnic thing, but because we cannot shake how we look, our identities can sway the position of people who may not know who you are. That's why it's important for us to always do the very best we can to become better Americans in a greater America.

The day will come when my grandsons, four of them, they're all biracial, and it's not done by choice; it's done by love. In Hawaii, where I know Ayrton grew up, even when I was growing up, they really didn't say, "What race is he?" They would say, "Well, what is he like?" By the last name or by where we lived in our towns, the families already kind of knew each other, so they were always more curious about your character, who you are, than whether or not you're...By the way, you say Ayrton? Is that how you pronounce your first name?

**AY: It's Ayrton.**

Ayrton. You're like our friends we grew up with. His nickname was Heinz—you know Heinz 57?—because he had so many different ingredients in who he was. But in the end he said, "It doesn't matter. I will answer to anything." We'd all, of course, start laughing. There will be a time in America where just by looking we won't know enough to know who they are. By then maybe then Dr. King's actual words will become the reality; that the children will be known by the content of their character and not the color of their skin. I hope that's what we're trying to convey in our oral history program.

**AY: What was it like growing up in the islands and how did that shape you and how you saw the different cultures interact with one another.**

Although our ethnic backgrounds varied (Hawaiian, Chinese, Japanese, Portuguese, etc.), we played together as friends after school and during weekends. Hawaii is known as the “Melting Pot of the Pacific” due to the diverse cultures of its residents. Overall, we lived harmoniously as a community, respecting each other. Some areas had a high concentration of certain ethnicities, for example, Mala Camp for Hawaiians and Mill Camp for Filipinos, etc. For the older generation who could not speak English well, we communicated in Pidgin English. Every household in town basically had some connection to the sugarcane or pineapple industries, because they provided the jobs. Money was tight, and neighbors and friends helped each other whenever possible. So, when the sugarcane workers went on strike for better wages and working conditions, neighbors set up a soup kitchen to feed the families who were on strike. It was this sense of community that influenced how I, as a school administrator, worked toward welcoming everyone into our *ohana*—our school family.

**AY: In your previous interview, you’d been jumping off the pier to collect coins in your mouth. Can you talk about what pier you jumped off of and why you did that?**

It was Lahaina Harbor, a small boat harbor, right next to the lighthouse in a little, wood-soaked area where the fishermen would unload their catch. One day the tourist buses started rolling in and the tourists asked us if we wanted to dive for dimes and nickels, if they threw them into the water. We all yelled, “Yes!”

Later, one of my friends—he is now a retired banker now—questioned why we were diving for nickels and dimes. He indicated we shouldn’t dive unless they throw quarters. We had



no shame. If our parents saw us doing that they would raise holy heck with us. They were more respectful.

Well, when Kennedy was killed what coin did they produce? The Kennedy half-dollar. So, there was a point after this coin was produced that we would dive only for quarters or Kennedy half dollars. The tourists would come. The bus drivers, they're our parents and uncles and cousins; they're the tour drivers, right? On the buses they're saying, "These are American boys; they swim like fish, but they're entrepreneurial. If you throw a dime and a nickel, they're not going for it." And in the bus, you could hear them erupt in laughter.

You have to understand. Those tour bus drivers, you could hear what they were saying on the outside of those buses as they were going down the road, and we knew from their voices who they were. The tourists would come out, and we'd all have those half-dollars. My friend yelled out that if they threw the coin too far we were not going to five. We were working the tourists like a hand pump. But the tourists played along. Those were the days.

**CW: Have you ever been back to Hawaii since leaving, and if so, how have you seen it change?**

We've been back many times, but many more times when our parents were alive. Once the grandparents, uncle, aunties, fathers and mothers were gone...it was a gradual realization, but we realized it wasn't home anymore. The realization was it took having them alive to make us feel at home. And so when they passed away and the relatives sold the houses, I hoped they always made enough money to make it worthwhile.

When we had our fiftieth high school reunion, we celebrated in two places: We had a celebration in Lahaina and we had one in Las Vegas. The people that ended up at the fiftieth reunion in Lahaina were essentially thirty people, and that's about fifteen couples. We had it here

in Las Vegas about a hundred and twenty people attended. You know why? Reasonable hotels. We got special rates and signed up restaurants that would serve us specific meals that we would want. But, for sure, we knew we could spend time at a Filipino, Japanese, Chinese, or Korean restaurant; something that everybody said they would like us to visit on this trip.

Of course, everybody flew on Hawaiian Airlines for the Hawaii Special whether you stayed at the California, Main Street or Fremont Street,( the Boyd Group hotels); These hotels were very user-friendly to the locals from Hawaii. Everyone was booked in rooms and had coupons for breakfast, lunch and dinner. My classmates loved the bargains that only the Boyd Hotels offered!

**NC: Can you speak on some of your childhood food stories, food that you've eaten growing up in Hawaii and maybe just some of the food that you were mentioning in downtown when family comes together?**

Lahaina's diverse cultural community offered so many different types of delicious foods. Growing up in a family with a Buddhist minister, church members always brought food to the house for our family to enjoy as snacks or for dinner. The church members were experts in preparing *inari* sushi; *nushimi* (Japanese stew); Okinawa *dango*; *namasu*, *takuan*, *nasubi*, pickled cucumbers, *kim chee* (all kinds of pickled vegetables); *manju*; *mochi*, and the list can go on and on. Then there were Hawaiian foods like kalua pig, *lomi lomi* salmon, poi, and *haupia*, as well as Filipino cuisine like *adobo*, *pancit*, and *lumpia*. Hooray for an endless supply of scrumptious and appetizing foods like chicken long rice, *malasadas*, *manaqua*, fried soup, shave ice, custard pie, mango bread, macadamia cream pie, *chow fun*, oxtail stew, redondo hot dogs, teriyaki beef and chicken, macaroni salad, bitter melon with pork hash, and *char siu* to satisfy the palate

I haven't begun to mention the salt water fish (numerous types), dried seeds (*li hi mui*, crack seeds, lemon peel, mango seeds, pickle mangos) or the fruits (papayas, avocados, mangos, lychee, star fruit, etc.) that were abundant in the neighborhood yards. Hawaii is a food paradise for anyone who wanted to be adventurous as I was growing up.

**KP: In your previous interviews, you talked about respect being the main motif in your teaching career. Do you still stand by that statement, the one that was mentioned in Agassi Prep's morning affirmation, or has that motto for your life changed or expanded over the years?**

We never referred to it as a "pledge" because their minds went, "I pledge allegiance..." It was really an affirmation. It was called "The Code of Respect" and goes like this: "The essence of good discipline is Respect. Respect for ourselves and respect for others; Respect for authority and respect for rules. It is an attitude that begins in the home, is reinforced at school, and then applied throughout life." When you pledge this, you pledge an allegiance or you pledge your word, your honor, but you're saying it so other people can hear it. I had this affirmation before I went to Agassi. As a classroom teacher I used to tell them to look at this thing every morning and every night when you brush your teeth. Of course, some kids like Student 1 would say to Student 2, "He only brushes once." You know, like that. When you first stop laughing...

Decades later, Student 1 owns a construction company here in town, and Student 2 is a senior vice president of a company. They came out of single-parent homes. But before they left, every single time I would say, "Have you done everything to make yourself better?"

Students that I had in seventh grade at Jim Bridger have sent me their sons' and daughters' graduation invitations. I had a grandmother bring her child by the hand. We were giving that child a Distinguished Dragon Award. She came up and asked if I remembered her. I

told her that her father owned a tire company in North Las Vegas; [I recalled,] “You sat in my third row, second period.” She was astonished that I remembered her. I remembered how the kids would tease her because the mother had her hair braided like Pippi Longstocking. She said, “Thank you for taking care of my grandchild like you guys took care of me.” She said she even moved her family into this neighborhood so they could go to school here.

**AY: I was just wondering if you could compare how it was like moving from Hawaii to Utah. Obviously you went to college there. What was that transition like culturally, and how did you adapt without having your parents and not having people that were like you?**

Before I chose Utah, I had been accepted to Northwestern University, UCLA, University of Hawaii, Ripon College in Wisconsin, and Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. However, I didn’t really know that Ripon College was going to be so expensive, so I couldn’t afford it; that’s scratched off. Northwestern, my friends who had relatives that went to Northwestern, including my uncle, indicated it’s very, very cold there. Well, scratch that off.

But the reality was my mother didn’t want me to go too far, and she didn’t want me at places like UCLA because of the hippie culture and UCLA was also known as a party school. My mother was envisioning this boy going absolutely crazy, especially when we started growing our hair long, oh my god. I think they plotted and worked with my counselor to steer me to Utah.

Now, my male counselor, who later became principal of my high school, was also the football coach. He told me, “Your brother is already at University of Illinois in pre-medical school. Don’t put that kind of pressure on your parents. Go Army.” So I said, “Okay.”

Coach recommended I go Army, but my mother wanted me to go to college. The other counselor at the high school suggested I give college a try and recommended the University of

Utah in Salt Lake City for the following reasons: 1) it's conservative; 2) it's ranked in the top twenty-five university in the country; and 3) your mother doesn't want you to go anyplace crazy.

That's how I ended up at Utah, because of an intervention by the women's counselor overriding the recommendations of the men's counselor. By the time I went, of course, I was ready for the college curriculum and was so excited.

What drastically changed was, on the day I left for college with my brother who was going to take me to Utah and then go on to his University of Illinois, my mother was killed by a drunk driver. That tourist who was driving drunk crossed the highway and killed my mother and put my fourteen-year-old brother in the hospital for three weeks and my sister in the hospital for four and a half months. Five days after she was killed, my father wanted us to fulfill our promise to our mother, so my brother and I left for college.

The first thing I did once I got to Utah was to look for a job. Student Services sent me to this man who was the head custodian of Austin and Ballif Hall. I went in to talk to him about getting a job, and he hired me. I knew at that point I was going to survive and move forward no matter what.

After I settled in the dorms, I met students all over the United States and the world. My neighbors were of every race, creed and color. Everyone on my floor was adjusting to the new environment so the transition culturally from Hawaii was no different from everyone else's. I was surprised to discover many residents had cars, went on ski trips, and left for expensive vacations with their families during the holidays. My image of poor students struggling to pay tuition was not necessarily accurate...many had full-ride or partial athletic/academic scholarships or parents who totally financed their university expenses. Many had expendable cash to buy all kinds of stuff to entertain themselves. However, for me, I worked as a custodian cleaning the

residence hall where I resided and spent holidays in a designated hall with other poor students who stayed on campus during the holidays.

As a necessity, I adapted to university life swiftly because I was determined to keep the promise I made to my mother to graduate with a university degree. In fact, it was that promise that propelled me in a continual forward direction no matter what obstacles I faced.

**KP: Could you talk about some of your most formative moments after you got to Vegas and your early teaching career?**

I was fortunate to be trained in elementary school by a mentor when I was a student teacher in Salt Lake City. He was a single man and he always wore a bowtie or a necktie. His neckties or bowties always had the colors of the season. Instead of saying, “Be quiet,” he would look at the kids and he would say, “Possum.” The kids would hear “possum,” and they played dead like possums. Then he would give his instruction. He often stated that if they didn’t remember everything he told them, they could look for help in the corner of the chalkboard. Everything that he had told them verbally was reinforced visually, and so they were very much in a pattern of learning. At the end of the day some would run back and examine and just do the whole checklist again. They would subsequently sit down and write it. Quiet, gentle, supportive.

When I got to Vegas, I was assigned to Jim Bridger Junior High School. Approximately 40 percent of the school’s student population was Black. In my first meetings with the department chair, she asked if I had taught Black children before? What she really wanted to know was if I was going to teach them differently.

I really had to think carefully about the answers I was going to give because if I said, “They’re all the same,” she could have said, “You’re unprepared.” If I said, “Well, I teach them

differently,” then the answer would be, “Why would you?” Either way I was in a trap, so I simply stated that I didn’t know how to answer her and could she give me some guidance?

She explained: Number one, the color of the skin does not determine their socioeconomic class. However, the majority of the kids living here may only have one parent in the home. Number two, their parents are not well educated. Number three, some of them come after not having eaten breakfast in the morning. Some don’t have a room to themselves. Then she went down the list. Lastly, she indicated that I don’t have to be anybody but myself because they will sniff you out if you’re a fake. Wow. I was thinking when I went home that night, “What have I gotten into?”

I remember teaching the children as if they were like my own children, nieces or nephews. The department chair reminded me that these are children of your fellow human beings and that some were poor, some were wealthy, some lived without a father’s influence; but, nonetheless, they had to be cared for.

I always cherished starting my career here in Jim Bridger Junior High School. In fact, I think most of my successes were in schools that were in the lower socioeconomic class and more minority than majority.

Can I ask one question? Kristel, do you remember your—you don’t have to give me a name—do you remember your favorite teacher?

**KP: Yes, I do.**

Yes? Without a last name, who was she and what did she teach?

**She taught choir in high school, and she was very inspirational. She helped me find my passion, and she’s a lot of the reason why I have passions and why I’ve found passions in certain things.**

Nessa, how about you?

**NC: I think about my high school teacher, too. She was like a grandma to everyone, and she did a lot of what you said. She just treated us like her grandchildren. She would be strict on us when she needed to, but it was like a tough love. Everyone would just stay in her room during lunch or after class. Yes, she was really nice.**

Cecilia?

**CW: Yes, I had him for two years, actually, and he treated us like individuals and like his children. His daughter did go to school with us, and he treated us just like his children. It was really special just to feel recognized in school.**

And, Ayrton?

**AY: Mine was my homeroom teacher. All of us were kind of like her children. She would fight tooth and nail for all of us. No matter if we were right or wrong, she would go to battle with us as if we were her own.**

My first appointment as a principal was at Sunset High school, an alternative school. The school ran at night and what we created at Sunset High School was eventually recognized as exemplary by the National Association for Secondary School Principals. There were actually seven schools in different states named Sunset High School because they ran it at night, just like we did. Part of the reason why we ran it at night was to allow students to work during the day. Many kids would drop out to work, so our motto was, "Don't drop out; work and go to school." We devised a way to earn dual credit, so if you took English One in the first semester you could catch up during the second semester by combining two periods of English. We concentrated on doing that with the core subject areas, not necessarily choir or auto shop, but English, social studies, science, and math. Kids that started to fail in their core subject areas were almost destined to fail without



catching up, and the only way to catch up was by going to summer school or alternative high schools. At Sunset High School we used the dual credit process to help graduate the students.

The dual credits also helped pregnant girls enrolled at sunset. But more importantly, we built an early childhood program so the teenage mothers could come back to school and drop off their infants at the childcare center on the campus. We started a partnership program with the Women's Hospital on [East] Sahara [Avenue], and nurse volunteers came to the school to supervise the care of the infants every night.

Additionally, the Ford Foundation wrote a check for seven thousand dollars to start a student-run store. The students needed business experience, so we established FBLA, Future Business Leaders of America, and enrolled them in bookkeeping, accounting, banking services, and clerical classes. As an incentive we told the students we would recommend them to day jobs at banks if they did well in their classes and completed their assignments on time.

We also started business partnerships with the banks. This was the best part. A famous banker in New York City who was the vice president at that time of American Express eventually became president and CEO and established (because there were so many kids not ready for work in New York) something called the Academy of Finance.

By the time I became principal of Clark High School, not only did we start the math and the science and technology magnet school, but the next one was the AOF, Academy of Finance. In 2001, we were asked to go to the AOF conference in San Antonio, Texas, and at that time AOF was established in to 271 schools in the U.S. All of a sudden, we're called to the stage and they declared that Clark High School's AOF program was the number-one banking school in a public school in America. It was truly memorable honor to be recognized.

By the way, I have noticed as an administrator that many teachers who teach business classes never worked in a bank, never worked as a manager for the Social Security Administration. But they were teaching the courses in high school. I said that what we've got to do in the Academy of Finance is teach them real life jobs that they're going to end up working someplace."

Well, lo and behold, you know what it became very popular with? Some of our Asian Pacific Island children. You know why? Because Wells Fargo Bank was opening branches in the Philippines, in Hong Kong, in Taiwan. Lord, not only them, but Bank of America. Some of our students that got in there who spoke Mandarin or Tagalog and English, were bilingual, *boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom*. By the time they were twenty-three years old, they were overseas. Then, of course, we taught the Japanese language at Clark. Lo and behold, those banks we just called out, they had branches in Tokyo and Osaka.

Sometimes... There were times I really didn't know for sure it would ever work. But if we didn't try, how would we know, right? When you play your music, are you a guitarist or pianist or what? What instrument is your major?

**KP: I was a vocal major and I played piano, too.**

Where are you hoping that will eventually lead you?

**KP: Well, I just like doing it now because it's one of my favorite hobbies. I like sharing my songs that I write. I like sharing my talent. I mostly do it because it makes other people happy, and that's mainly... But I also see it as a branch in psychology for therapy practices because I'm a psychology major now. I combine those two talents of mine, and I'm planning to channel it into my major.**

**AY: I was wondering if you could elaborate on what lessons your parents and grandparents taught you and what lessons that you really keep close to your heart when you think of the lessons they taught you and the lessons you wish you could tell the entire world.**

My parents taught me to deal with difficult situations with “no excuses; and quit feeling sorry for yourself.” My father even said he did not return to Japan after being placed in relocation camps during WWII because America offered many more opportunities for success. He related to me that when traveling on your road, your road of life and in the middle of the road is this big stone, huge. It’s blocking your way. Who are you going to blame for that rock? Mother Nature for having an avalanche? God for putting this huge unbearable load in front of you? Remember, all you have to do is look at it and say, ‘I can go around it; I can go around this way; dig my way under it and come out the other side; or I can simply look at it and say to myself, ‘This is like a stepping stone on your way up.’

Like the huge stone in my path, my mother’s death seemed insurmountable, but I found ways to overcome the tragic event. I didn’t let my mother’s unfortunate death be that roadblock for me.

That’s the other thing, we talked about my mother and my father, but I had some phenomenal luck in marrying my wife. We married when she was nineteen and I was twenty, and we thought, ‘We’re mature; we can handle this.’ But when our daughters were starting to be nineteen and twenty, we said, ‘Oh boy, they’re not like us. They’re not as mature.’ This and that, this and that. But it all ended up...educated. They go to work every single day. They’ve given us four grandsons. They’re not on drugs. They are citizens of merit. I think my wife and I at least

have that under our belts. By how I live my life, by my example, I hope to show my family that a never-quit attitude will lead them to success.

**SE: How long did Sadie teach in the Clark County School District, and what year did she graduate UNLV?**

Sadie received her Bachelor of Science and Education degree in 1975. She taught for four years at Helen Marie Smith Elementary School and became a stay-at-home mom after the births of our daughter.

**SE: At the beginning of the interview you talked about how your generation number is mixed because on one side you're *nisei* and on the other side *sansei*. Did I get that correct?**

That's about right, yes.

**SE: Can you please explain the different generation names and what they mean in the Japanese community, or the Japanese American community?**

I can't speak, of course, for all the ethnicities listed as AAPI, but from my perspective most of our culture asks us to be mindful of the sacrifices our ancestors have made for us to be able to enjoy the benefits of life here. I think they always want us to grow up well-mannered and well-educated, but to use education in such a way to make life better for others. The generation names are *Issei*, First Generation individuals who immigrated from Japan to the U.S.; *Nisei*, Second generation individuals born in the U.S. and whose parents immigrated from Japan; *Sansei*, Third Generation individuals born in the U.S. and whose grandparents immigrated from Japan; *Yonsei*, Fourth generation individuals whose great-grandparents immigrated from Japan, and *Gosei*, Fifth generation individuals whose great-great-grandparents immigrated from Japan.)

**SE: When you were in Salt Lake, did you get involved in the Japanese community there?**

Unfortunately, I did not get involved I was too busy with classes and my part time job.

**NC: Is there anything that you regret in your views or anything you'd change?**

It's the "what if" syndrome... what if I did something this way or that way. Certainly the outcome would be different or maybe not. I am not without regrets and do try to make amends but I can't live a life of regrets. What was appropriate 20 or 30 years ago is subject to criticism today. Statues are being torn down, people cancelled, certain acceptable views yesterday are subject to criticism today. I live by the golden rule, "Treat others the way you want to be treated," and you'll never regret your actions

Of course there are things I would like changed such as the premature death of my mother, but life goes on with or without tragedies. I try my best to cope and move forward instead of dwelling on what could have been. I would rather be an optimist versus a pessimist and find the ray of sunlight in difficult situations. Poet Robert Frost once said, "*In three words I can sum up everything I've learned about life: it goes on.*" So I too will go on and surround my life with family and good friends.

**SE: Is there anything that we haven't asked you that you would like to talk about or that you hoped we would ask?**

Actually, a couple of times I looked up because I've gone on longer than I thought. But your questions, I thank you because they've been very probing. It's funny; I promise you that I have never spent as much time thinking about what I was going to say until you asked it. I wasn't in the yard blowing the leaves and then suddenly I'm thinking, what kind of influence? You know what I'm saying. But if there's anything, I wish that I could take the time that you've taken to ask you as the interviewers, "Have I done everything I could to bring out the best in you?" Because as you write something and hear something and think something and you talk to each other about something, did I do enough so that I could have brought something out in you--

whether it's Kristel or Cecilia or Aryton or Nessa. Then hopefully, maybe a year from now when the project is done, I would love to have this non-pandemic time where we don't see each other through a screen, and I just want to hear, what is it that you want to do with your lives? I would be wondering, as I wondered with many of my students, what is it that you wished to do? What are the goals in your life? What did your mother and father say to you? What did your grandparents—did you know your grandparents? What kind of influence did they have? What kind of food do you enjoy? All those.

I didn't know, Stefani, that you had a doll in the glass case that was for Girls Day. And then once I knew that, all of a sudden I'm downloading all kinds of stuff to send you so you would know what the dolls were all about and why they do this and what influence they have; what rich people do with these glass cases and dolls and handmade and porcelain faces that are painted on, or how a person that can't afford to do all that makes them out of straw and they study the designs on the costumes and how they put them together.

Or you're majoring in jazz. What do you hope to do with that? Jazz musicians can take any direction they want to, just like my friend. Who would have thought that he would run one of the most prolific and profitable commercial food restaurants? Because one side is the restaurant where you sit down and you have food and you talk to each other, but the other one is a commercial business where he's making so many lunches for Hawaiian Airlines and so many lunches for Scenic Bus Lines and Scenic Airlines or if they're going to have a Japanese Association event from California and they want Japanese-style bento lunches and they're willing to pay fifteen dollars a plate or something like that. Who knows that he was going to be a graduate of Berklee School of Music, and who knows why he integrated jazz into one of his restaurants? And he's a fluent Japanese speaker.

I would wonder all the next couple of days and months that we work together, is that important to you that people see that you are biracial? Is that part of the persona? Then once people know and identify with you as biracial—and in the back of my mind with my four grandsons who are biracial—will they ever come across a history teacher that would have them say, “I denounce my white dominance?” Will there ever be a teacher to put that question in front of my grandsons? And how will my grandsons have been taught by me and my children how to respond to that? How are my biracial grandsons going to handle being what I see in Yamaguchi over here the prototype American? In fact, when I look at people like Ayrton and Peralta and Winchell, I am looking at the prototype Americans. How people see you and are going to be determining part of how they see others, and by your lead, by your example, by your leadership, hopefully you’ll create opportunities for the next person that looks, talks, thinks and feels like you.

This is what I would have liked to have had time to ask you. Oral history of us old farts; that’s important. But let me tell you, oral history captured by people like yourself about people your age, it might be a shorter history, but it’s not insignificant. I think, Stefani, you’re doing God’s work. Someplace along the way, somebody is going to read something written down by them about what they thought they heard and what they felt and how they perceived what us old farts were saying, and maybe they’ll do a better job than my own children would, because to them I’m just Dad, or to my grandsons, “Oh, he’s Grandpa.” What do you do with Grandpa? Fish, play baseball, hike, run around, beg for money.

I hope that this thing will be a very meaningful experiment and experience for you, and that in your case of recording all this, thirty years from now come back to what you recorded. Go to the archives and say, “What did I write? What do I remember? What did they tell me then that

has stayed with me?” Or, “Nothing they said is important to me.” That’s important, too, because the times can change how you perceive things. Well, that’s all I have to say.

**KP: I just want to thank you so much. You have really given me a lot to think about, a lot of life advice. Yes, I am probably going to take a lot of things from the interview and just think about them. It was really reflective, this interview, for me because you have all this wisdom and experience, and then you’re right; we’re all just starting out, and so it’s a lot to think about. Thank you.**

You’re welcome. I hope that it will be a meaningful experience. And I’m serious, thirty years from now, bring your friends to this archive. I hope you’ll have the opportunity to come back to it and say, “This is what I picked up in those minutes, hours, times. This is what I remember most about the interview.”

**AY: Yes. One of my questions that I asked you stemmed from my grandfather. He actually dove off the piers on Oahu Towers in Honolulu doing the same thing you did, collecting coins with your mouth and—**

The Oahu Tower, he was a big time with all those ships, wow. He must have cashed *cha-ching*.

**AY: It’s very interesting. My *papu* changed his name to avoid the concentration camp, so he took his great-grandmother’s name. It’s very cool to see how your story kind of aligns with his stories I’ve heard growing up. It’s really insightful to see and hear stories that I never heard because I was either too young, they passed away, or it was taboo to ask because you never want to hurt those elderly family members in your family and bring up unwanted emotions; so I was unaware to ask. But if I were there now I would just be too scared because I don’t know what that could bring up within them, and I don’t want them to stay in that place. We have moved on and they’ve grown past it. But I think it was**



**beautiful to hear you talk about your wife and your family. I think it was so intriguing to hear you talk about Japanese culture and how it translated to Hawaii and how your Hawaii lined up with the Hawaii I know.**

Just the very fact that when I went to learn *hula*, it was not exactly something my guy friends wanted to do. My mother was a second-grade teacher, and the third-grade teacher was Mrs. Sharpe, whose family were Hawaiian entertainers for luaus at hotels and parties. Mrs. Sharpe was part of the Aluli family and their family estate was in Lahaina. At night you could roll down the car windows and smell the air because the night-blooming cereus growing out of the rocks and the crevices along the road to the entryway of the Aluli family estate. Their famous song “Puamana” talks about the moonlight glistening off the waves in the ocean. In fact, when you drive there you actually see it on a moonlit night.

The integration of cultures, of family names, like the Puahalas, like Kaniho, these are not names I have to go look up because they’re my neighbors. I loved the food, culture, dance, and jam sessions on Friday nights. Our ukulele and guitar teacher was Mr. Sam Mo’okini. He is one of the most respected musicians in Lahainaluna history, and he was our actual teacher. How could we not grow up respecting all races, creeds and colors? If we had to learn something, right in the middle of the Pacific, on one of the most isolated land masses in the United States, Hawaii with the *ohana* can teach an entire world.

Well, I’m looking forward to you all and I’d love to know where you are five years from now, what you’ve done with your lives, and who will be the lucky person to win your hand.

**SE: Unless any of you have any further questions, I think we’re going to say thank you. I’m going to agree with Kristel in her assessment of how I’m going to walk away from this**

**interview. You have made all of us think. I think we're all going to be better for having had this chat with you, so I want to thank you very much.**

Well, thank you. No, it is my thank-you to you. I appreciate the opportunity to be asked sincere questions, and I'm hoping that you understood that sometimes I can get a little long in my explanations, but I always perceive the question asked sincerely as deserving of the most sincere answer I could give you. It's your time, too. I don't want to waste it.

**SE: You didn't. Thank you so much.**

Oh, thank you. I appreciate you all. Thank you again. And Nessa. I know she had to leave.

**SE: Thank you so much and enjoy the rest of your day.**

I will, thank you.

**SE: We may want to come back later for an informal chat.**

That's fine. I enjoy your company. I respect what you're doing and who you are. I'd love to hear more about your direction and what you want to do with the college and what you want to do with your own goals.

The only thing I can leave you with finally is... You know what a Post-It is, right? Where you take the thing off and it sticks onto a mirror? I was asked earlier about the affirmation that we did at Agassi. What I've said to all my administrative trainees, the teachers and staff members, is take that Post-It and list two to three of the most important goals that you have for yourself and stick it right up there where you brush your teeth or shave. Whatever happens, but most people brush in the morning and they brush at night, and so put those two or three most important goals that you want to achieve, and you try to be your very best and set time limits on it. Don't write a goal that's ten years in the making, although that's good if you have a diary somehow. But put those two to three most important things so that when you brush before you

go to bed or when you wake up it's the first and last thing that you always see. I have found that over the years those goals come true, those dreams come true because that's exactly what you set for yourself. It's hard to lie to yourself, so you're not going to put unrealistic goals up there, but then realistic is determined not by me, but by you. You have the resources, you have the abilities, you have the support, you have the means.

I used to also do an exercise with everybody that I was going through training with, and that is, how do you solve a problem? One, you get to know what that problem is. Instead of saying *problem*, you say *challenge*. The second part is, what resources do you have to meet that challenge? The third is: once you know what you have as resources, the next question would be, what resources don't you have? Fourth one would simply say, now that you know what resources you have and what resources you don't, prioritize. Fifth write out your plan. Number six, implement your plan. Then the last one is, did you succeed? If you methodically do that you'll solve every problem you think you'll ever have.

**SE: I think that's a perfect way to end this interview. Thank you so much.**

Oh, again, it's my thank-you to all of you. Good luck.

**ALL: Thank you.**

You're welcome. Thank you, thank you.

**[End of recorded interview]**