The following oral history is from a recorded interview with Helen Nakano (HN) conducted by Mānoa Heritage Center Executive Director Jessica Welch (JW) on April 13, 2022 online via TheirStory. This interview is part of the Mānoa Heritage Center’s oral history project name.

Please keep in mind that this is a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose. The following transcript has been reviewed, edited, and approved by the narrator.

**Jessica Welch:** Okay, we’re on. Hi Helen. Will you tell me what your name is and where you were born?

**Helen Nakano:** I’m Helen Nakano and I was born in Honolulu, Hawaii almost 85 years ago.

**Jessica Welch:** Wonderful and your family moved to Mānoa when you were 10, and then you left the valley as an adult and lived away until you return to retire when you were 50. How did Mānoa change during the time you were away?

**Helen Nakano:** You know, when I lived first lived in Mānoa, it was much more rural and I remember being able to play in the stream, Mānoa Stream and pick guava and splash around and I can’t do that now. And I knew my neighbors more, you know, because I walked more. So I would say that my neighborhood has changed quite a lot. There are a lot of newcomers coming in and many of these are business people who have moved into Mānoa because it's convenient and it’s maybe their children are going to Mid-Pac or Punahou or Maryknoll, and they wanted to come closer to their children’s schools and they’re very busy. So they drive into their home, eat and sleep there and then go out again. So I think we are losing a lot of the community feeling that I grew up with.

**Jessica Welch:** Mmm-hmm, that makes sense. That makes sense. What are you up to now?

**Helen Nakano:** You know what? I am so busy. I’m a unrecovered community volunteer. I belong to Mālama Mānoa. In fact, Mary Cooke took me from working or volunteering as a member of the Mānoa Neighborhood Board to being her sidekick and founding Mālama Mānoa and we are celebrating what 30 years of that community organization this year. And also I am pretty active in Be Ready Mānoa, which is a disaster preparedness organization. And although I can’t help with a lot of physical things anymore, I still am on their committee and I enjoy being part of Mānoa Heritage Center and there, I feel that I’m making a contribution because we are working on affinity groups to bring the people of Mānoa closer to Mānoa Heritage Center by forming ethnic groups, Filipinos in Mānoa, Japanese in Mānoa. And I was thinking, you know, maybe we should have something called new immigrants or something newcomers in Mānoa because many of these people are new citizens or coming from different countries, and I think it would we would serve the community by making them feel more welcome.

**Jessica Welch:** That’s a great idea

**Helen Nakano:** That will be my next project.

**Jessica Welch:** That’s a great one.

**HN:** And also yeah, I’m a one-Grandma-business owner. I started my business about oh a dozen years already and my tax attorney, my tax consultant told me not to form a non-profit, even though you may not make much money, but to form an LLC, a limited liability company because he said that it would be much easier for me. I didn't have to work with a board. I wouldn't get audited as much and I would be much freer to do what I wanted to do. And so that was one of the best advice I could get from anybody. And that, you know, has been such a blessing. I've been rewarded 100-fold by the things that we’ve been doing. I made a list of all the libraries and senior centers and the schools and the other community organizations that we reached out to. We have literally taught thousands and thousands of people in Hawaiʻi about reconnecting with not only their Japanese culture, but also native plants by this game of Hanafuda that I promote.

**JW:** So cool. And in addition to running a business, you have a family.

**HN:** Yes, two of my sons and their wives live with us. So I have two little toddlers, grandchildren, three, and five years old. And so we are like a lot of other families in Hawaii, multigenerational. You know, and I just enjoy it because I don’t feel old when I have young people around and everybody’s there to share the chores. In fact, I don't have to cook or clean do anything anymore because the young people take over.

**JW:** Oh, that's so nice. Youʻre onto something Helen. How would you describe yourself?

**HN:** I enjoy challenges. I enjoy learning new things. I’m very curious. I am a fitness buff. I was, I did Bikram hot yoga for 21 years. And now I’m taking pilates about four times a week and my latest challenge is hundred squats a day for one month. Try it, it’ll shape your butt. I like people I like to work with people. So what I did was I asked, I rounded up all my friends and I said, will you volunteer and help me teach? So I have about a dozen ladies and I constantly recruit for younger people and we go around and teach but that group of people have become my best friends too, because we’re doing something together that’s fun. And we feel that we’re making a difference, you know? So that’s my core group.

**JW:** Doing the hanafuda together.

**HN:** Yes.

**JW:** And you’re taking acting classes, can you tell me more about?

**HN:** I’m not afraid or ashamed to acknowledge that I need a lot of help and I can always improve. And so I did a program for Lyon Arboretum on Zoom and I felt very uncomfortable. I was reading most of the time and I thought I did a very poor job. And so when I saw that Mānoa Heritage, I mean, Mānoa Valley Theatre was offering acting classes and coaching classes and I said, hey I need it. So I have been going to coaching classes. It’s been about three months ago already. I’m putting on a pretty big Hanafuda program for the Japanese Cultural Center on May 7th, and they’re going to have it in the ballroom. About a hundred people, they hope. And so I am preparing. I mean, I’m working really hard and my teacher gave me a prop. So I’m going to really be great!

**JW:** Oh, I can’t wait. I can’t wait. I have no doubt Helen. You mentioned Mānoa Valley Theatre, so are you a fan of the performing arts?

**HN:** Yes, you know, I’m not a music fan. I don’t do crafts. I don’t really play a lot of cards except for Hanafuda because I can, you know, find a way to relate to people and Hanafuda is very easy, so I don’t have to remember too much and then also it’s a short game, about 15 minutes. So, you know, I played that but otherwise I love of all things performing arts. And so I have tickets, season tickets to the Mānoa Valley Theatre, to the Diamond Head Theatre, and I just saw a play written by a local about Alzheimer’s at Kumu Kahua and I’m going to finally be a season ticket holder for Kumu Kahua. Yeah, it was just very touching, and I think it should go national because so many families are affected by it.

**JW:** We’re so lucky to have so many theaters in our in our neighborhood.

**HN:** Yeah, you know, and they’re all amateurs. So maybe, you know, I have potential.

**JW:** I don’t doubt that either. So in addition to being a theater fan and Hanafuda. I know that you are also a community organizer.

**HN:** Yes. I guess it’s better than bossing around the people in my family, you know, as some mothers do. So, I decided that I like to organize things and I don’t like to do it by myself. So I always try to get other people to work with me and use their talents. And so, through the years. I have organized some big fairs. We used to have ʻOhana Nights for Mānoa. And Eco fairs and community fairs. And at Mālama Mānoa, one of the biggest accomplishments that I am proudest of, is we partnered with the Board of Water Supply and I think it was like, 38 thousand dollars they gave us to conduct a survey. And it was conducted by students and we enrolled about 12 schools in the area and they did surveys. And our goal was to have the students teach the adults about preservation and conservation of water. And so we won an EPA award for that and I’m very proud of it. And right now what we're doing in Mālama Mānoa is very exciting. We’re gathering other community groups. We call them Community Mānoa Stakeholders, and we conducted our first confabulous last year. It had to be virtual, but this year we’re going to have another confabulous and we will invite all those 25 organizations and invite even more because I believe that collaboration among all the groups working together is the way to go. And in Mālama also, we are starting a group called RAD, which is Rapid Albizia Death. And we are going to cover over a mile, a 1.2 mile area on the Mānoa Stream and recruit owners, residents who live along the stream, and we're going to kill all the saplings that are six inches in diameter with, with hand saws, and scrape their barks. And we're hoping to have this big army of volunteers going up the stream. And if we do it maybe annually, eventually we’ll be able to kill all the albizia in the area, which is a real hazard. So, I mean, I don’t have the energy and the strength to be in the volunteer group that does that. But I’ll be in the back there and I’ll help them with the organizing it. Maybe I’ll pass out donuts and coffee or something like that.

**HN:** I can’t hear you.

**JW:** Oh, I’m sorry, Helen. I muted myself. It says here that you worked for the Army and Air Force Exchange. What was that like?
  **HN:** It was wonderful and terrible. I started off working as a receptionist for the Army and Air Force Exchange Service in United Kingdom. And I had been a stay-at-home mom for about a dozen years. And it was really a transition that was very difficult for me, but I worked my way up and I became a visual merchandiser and then we moved to Japan and, because I was a military dependent, I had no status or no benefits. So I had to start off at the bottom again when I reached Japan, but I was able to finally get into the bottom management of the personnel department and there, I was allowed to form a new program called the Daruma Program. Now Daruma was a Buddhist monk who meditated so hard that he lost the use of his legs and you would push him down and then he would bob up and you push him down and he’d bop up again. And the whole idea of the Daruma program was you keep on trying, and eventually you will succeed. And all these...I recruited promising employees who are hourly paid and helped them to get management positions, but they would have to work hard themselves. And so this was really, I think, very, very rewarding for me. And I really felt I was making a difference in their lives. And then when my husband was transferred again, do you know what they wanted me to start from the bottom again? And I said, no way I wasn’t gonna do that. So that was my life as a military dependent. I had so many different jobs. I mean, every place I went I had to start from the bottom.

**JW:** That’s hard. I know Helen that you have a wonderful sense of humor and that you like to meditate. Can you tell me more about your meditation practice?

**HN:** Yes. I have found a wonderful, wonderful lay meditation teacher and his name is Dr. Gregory Pai and he has these classes at the Broken Ridge Korean Buddhist Temple in Palolo. I don’t like it right now because it’s on zoom and I find it very difficult to meditate with my sangha when I'm looking at a computer. So, I am waiting until it opens up again. But I, I really appreciate what a Greg Pai does and I think it’s a wonderful way to navigate life in the modern society. Yeah, he’s awesome.

**JW:** Do you meditate everyday Helen?

**HN:** I used to! I’ve fallen off the bandwagon but I'm waiting for the sangha. I’ll get back.

**JW:** You’ve done so much. So many different careers. Do you still have things you want to do or accomplish that you haven’t accomplished yet?

**HN:** No, I don’t have anything left in my bucket list.

**JW:** You’ve done it all.

**HN:** I’ve done a lot of traveling because of my husband's military career. I not only traveled, I think we did about five different states. We lived in five different states. And then we lived in the United Kingdom. We had two stints in Japan. And then we lived in Thailand. And so while we were overseas, you know, I visited different countries and things. No, I, you know, I’m not greedy. I am very thankful that I had the life that I have and that I’m living in paradise right now.

**JW:** Isn't that wonderful? You're a lucky lady. What are the most important things you have learned along the way?

**HN:** Well, you know, I can't say when I get older. I am old already and it’s tough. I’m losing so many relatives and friends. It’s hard to say goodbye. In fact, my brother-in-law. We just lost our brother-in-law.

**JW:** I’m so sorry.

**HN:** I’m going to take my sister out to lunch. And then the next day I am taking a sensei out because she lost her husband. And then there's another sensei whose husband is in hospice and she will lose him in a few months or so. So, you know, it's all over and trying to be a good friend. It’s difficult. I have quite a few friends who are in care homes, and so, I have to be strong. I have to be compassionate. I have to lend a hand, because I’m still physically and mentally and emotionally and financially able to help a little bit. So, yeah. It’s hard. It's really hard. And so you have to be tough. You have to be very tough. And then I would like to tell people that they need to be tuned into the universe because what I have found is that the universe is there, we just have to be a little bit more aware of things. I think that...I believe in serendipity, which is that things happen to benefit you and assist you, especially if you're trying to do something that is beneficial to other people. And you know, it happens to me all the time. I get to meet a stranger that gives me the answer to a puzzle that I’ve been thinking about. Or a parking stall opens up when I’m in a rush or a rainbow appears when I’m feeling down, you know. It happens to everybody. We just have to be a little...take the time to notice these things, and the help of nature.

**JW:** Are there any other nuggets of wisdom you'd like to pass on to the next generation?

**HN:** Gee... you know what, we’ve not done a good job. Our generation has not done a good job of taking care of our environment and what we're passing on to our children and my grandchildren. I’m kind of, I’m kind of ashamed of. Everybody needs to work harder. We have been poor stewards of our environment and we need to really do better. We really need to do better.

**JW:** We sure do. Well, with people like you leading the way there’s hope Helen.