

Akemi Simon – February 15, 2023

The following oral history is from a recorded interview with Akemi Simon (AS) conducted by Mānoa Heritage Center (MHC) Botanical Educator, Kanoa Nakamura (KN) on February 15, 2023 at MHC's Visitor Education Hale. This interview is part of Mānoa Heritage Center's Oral History Project.

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.

Kanoa Nakamura: Live. Good morning.

Akemi Simon: Good morning.

Kanoa Nakamura: My name is Kanoa Nakamura. I'm part of Mānoa Heritage Center's interviewing team, and I'll be interviewing you today. So we'll start with number one. What is your name?

Akemi Simon: My name is Akemi Hata Simon.

Kanoa Nakamura: And when, where were you born?

Akemi Simon: I was born September 5th, 1956, here in Honolulu. I believe it was Queen's Hospital. I can't remember, I can't- I know it's on my birth certificate.

Kanoa Nakamura: Okay. And what is the address of your home in Mānoa?

Akemi Simon: 2630, twenty-six thirty O'ahu Avenue.

Kanoa Nakamura: And did your parents name you after anyone?

Akemi Simon: No, my parents chose- actually, I don't know how they got the 'Akemi.' I was born Katherine Akemi Hata so- and I asked them once, "How did you get Katherine?" And they said they got it from the book from- from the name book in the hospital. So I wasn't named after anyone.

Kanoa Nakamura: Any other name, middle names that you may have gotten?

Akemi Simon: Well, now I go by Akemi, which used to be my middle name.

Kanoa Nakamura: I see.

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AS: That's two characters in Japanese. They've never said to me that it was- I was named after anyone in particular. But it's two Japanese characters, *akarui*, which is 'bright', and *utsukushi*, which is 'beautiful.' So that's the- and now I go by Akemi now.

KN: Great you know that, though. [laughs]

AS: Yeah, my mother's from Japan, so- so she's a Japanese nat- she was a Japanese national so I apparently, according to my cousins, growing up my sister and I both, we were— speaking Japanese as little kids, and that was our first language. I- I don't even remember that, of course, but that was- they said that "Oh, yeah, you folks were- you were just talking Japanese all the time." You know, "We thought you guys were strange" type of thing. My cousins that I grew up with here.

KN: So your mother was born in Japan. Where was your father born?

AS: He was born in Hilo.

KN: In Hilo.

AS: Hilo, yeah. But He's- I know he had half his education in Japan. So about middle school he went- middle school to maybe high school he was in Japan. And he graduated college, university in Japan.

KN: What did your parents do for a living?

AS: My mother was a housewife, a typical Japanese housewife. My father was a businessman here, locally. His- my grandfather was an immigrant that moved here from Japan, Hiroshima, and— he started a business in Hilo, which was eventually to become Hata Shoten, which is quite- actually, they knew- most people knew about Hata Shoten in those days.

KN: Okay. So your father's side of the family came from Hiroshima area?

AS: Yes.

KN: Where did your mother's side of the family come from?

AS: It's also Hiroshima, the ken, the province. But it's a city, Kure. My father's from Hiroshima city, the outskirts of Hiroshima city. But my mother's from Kure city in Hiroshima-ken. Kure's a nav- it was a former naval port in Japan.

KN: Where did you live as a child? You live in Mānoa now. But where did you grow up?

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AS: When I was born or- I know right before I was born, my parents moved into this home on 2630 O‘ahu Avenue.

KN: Oh, okay.

AS: So my home has always been 2630 O‘ahu Avenue. I’ve gone away to school and I was in the mainland for a little while, but I always came home here and eventually I- now I’m living there, you know, my mother’s passed away, but I took the home. Basically, I inherited the home.

KN: You attended university on the mainland, then?

AS: Yes, I did.

KN: What were you studying?

AS: Psychology. And I became a social worker, a geriatric social worker.

KN: The next question is a little bit— maybe you have some stories that you’d like to tell us about your childhood or what was it like growing up in Mānoa back then?

AS: Well— I think in general, I was probably in a bubble when I think back. I look at it as my childhood, then I went away. You know, I grew up till I graduated high school, then I went away to school, and then I worked in the mainland, and then I eventually came home as an adult. So I look at it sort of- my Mānoa experience at least, I see it as those two sections, very different you know because I was like almost like a different person already, you know, in those [days]. But it was marked with that time away, basically, which was about fourteen years, actually, that I was away. So because I went to school and I worked and everything, but as a child, I would say, I always- life was Mānoa, generally, everything was Mānoa.

AS: I went to Mānoa Elementary School, and after that I actually went to private school, which was La Pietra, now it’s called La Pietra now, but it’s Hawai‘i School for Girls. But it used to be at Central Union Church, which was still Mānoa, you know, I mean, it’s down- just down the street here. So, first few years there, I was still in Mānoa, and then eventually, they [La Pietra] moved to the Diamond Head campus. So that’s where- would be the only place where I kind of went outside of Mānoa, you know, for most of my [life] I would say it’s basically Honolulu, Mānoa, that’s my life. So it was very, it’s very— to me it was very insulated. I would say that- I used to walk my dogs every day with my neighbor, the two girls in the neighborhood, neighbor next door. We used to walk our dogs all around Mānoa, that kind of stuff. So we’ve seen Mānoa Stream. We did- we did all the- I know my neighbors were not allowed to go near the stream, so we just would look from the bridge or something like that because

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their mother wouldn't let them, was afraid of flash floods or something like that. But I always wanted to go down. But I never did because I was always usually with them, that type of stuff.

AS: I remember Mānoa School, Mānoa Elementary School, they- now they have those wooden slats in their windows, but they used to have clear regular windows that went up and down- kind of thing, old style windows, but big glass windows. And if you- you could see the mountains every day in classes, I remember that. And if you know, things got a little boring, you'd be staring out there daydreaming, you know, looking up at the mountains. And on rainy days, like today, you could actually see the waterfalls. You could count them. And people say they're seven or eight, and we'd try to count them. I never got the amount, but I would remember we would- we'd be "Oh, look, we can see the waterfalls today." That kind of stuff. You could actually see them, I suppose the brush has grown, the trees and everything, so you can't see it anymore. But in those days, you could see it. You could really see, actually see from Mānoa School, you know, right down the valley here, you could see things pretty clearly all the time, you know?

KN: You mentioned the bridge and you mentioned, like you said, the waterfalls. But did you ever encounter any of the swimming holes that are rumored to be about in Mānoa?

AS: You know, I'm not a water person, so unfortunately that wasn't my thing. I'm sure there are some other people that did that. So, for me, I was a distance. I would look at things like that and say—yeah yeah yeah—and say "Oh, isn't that nice?" But I had no desire to go and, and do that. In fact, the recent going to Kānewai, was, I've never been there. I've lived here all- and I've never been near there, but I know there's something down there because I've always gone over that bridge, you know, driving over on Dole Street. I'd always been going over there, but I've never gone down there. And that was just like eye-opening experience for me, because I mean, I've seen the stream only- mainly from the- either up on, where's that- Pawaina. Up there, there's a bridge there and you can see the stream. And then down here, of course, on Lowrey you can see the bridge. And then Woodlawn, you can see there's a bridge there, too. So those are the only places where I could actually see the stream, you know? And I would see it, but otherwise, the water I tended to stay away from.

KN: Just in case.

AS: Just in case, in case. I guess, it's just that's the way it happened, you know.

KN: So you said your father was a businessman in Hilo. Did he ever move to O'ahu, or what do you remember about business in Mānoa in general, or was he involved?

AS: Actually, my grandfather started the business in Hilo, and eventually, as it grew, he did open a store in- down on Maunakea Street in Downtown. So, eventually that— the business was here. It was the main business, it became the main store, whatever there was. It was a basic like a general store. But I

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think they eventually concentrated more on dry goods. And my father had a— younger brother, my grandfather had a younger brother who he gave the grocery side of the business to. And that was— eventually became Y. Hata, which people, I know people know now. That- that's we're related to them.

KN: Oh, you see their trucks driving around?

AS: Yeah, yeah, yeah. That eventually became yeah yeah. So That was that business. But my father, what happened was, is I think by the time- I'm sure he was involved with the business. There was I think, some contention. My grandfather didn't want him to go to— college thinking school was not, in those days they were very hands on you know they were just into, so he felt that he should just work, you know he should just do the business. But my father wanted to go, so they, he agreed- the grandfather- my grandfather eventually agreed that he could go to Kobe University, which is a, was a business-related school. So he was able to go there- commercial school, I think that's what they called it. So he did go there and graduate. He eventually came back here, I'm guessing although he's never told me, he helped in the business. But when the war was imminent, they all- they moved back to Japan.

KN: To Hiroshima?

AS: To Hiroshima. So, cause basically my father's family was very Japanese even though they were here, they were still very Japanese. And the relationship with Japan was very strong because my grandfather's business was bringing- importing a lot of Japanese goods for the folks here. That was part of the business. So, it was still very strong in Japan, too. So he wanted to- I think his feeling was actually, my grandfather very- I would say, typical Japanese samurai type of guy, believed that Japan would win the war.

KN: Very loyal.

AS: Yeah, he was very loyal. The story I have heard was that he actually even bought a airplane for the Japanese Air Force and donated an airplane. I mean, he was pretty much and of course, his feeling was, "You gotta beat the Americans so that I can get my holdings back in Hawai'i." That's his belief, that's how he looked at things.

KN: Because at that time it was- he couldn't access those assets.

AS: Well, not when the war- once the war started, right? But his feeling was going to Japan was safer for him, and it probably would have been. My guess is, is that my grandfather, as a prominent businessman in Hawai'i probably would have been interned. You know, he never was because he was in Japan, but he probably would have been interned and probably my father along with him, I'm sure. But, because he was in Japan he never was interned, but he had to go through the war there. I don't think it was- he was older, my father never got drafted. I think he was a little too old and he might have been

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next in line. And I know he told me that- I asked him, “How come you didn’t get drafted? They were taking every- all these men in Japan, right?” I mean, toward the end, especially. And he said, “Well, they told me my eyesight was bad,” and- which, it was. And, apparently when he was a kid, he got his finger caught in a sugar cane machine in Hilo. His thumb. So it doesn’t bend. And that was problematic, I guess, for shooting a gun. To me it seems such- so minor. But, that’s what he told me- that that was the problem, according to him. So he never really got drafted. I mean, I’m glad he didn’t, but I was surprised that he- you know, he wasn’t first in line because he wasn’t young enough. But he would’ve- I would think probably if they continued the war, I’m guessing my dad would have probably eventually been- you know, considered. But on the other hand, he was in Hiroshima.

KN: Yeah, I mean, people will obviously associate that with the nuclear bomb.

AS: Yeah, and he was he was actually there. He was- my father’s a hibakusha [survivor of the atomic bombings]. So— I don’t know if that makes it any better. He survived it you know, but- outskirts. And he’s told us stories a little bit about that. You know, mostly, my fath- I learned later from a school- one of my school counselors that my father had shared with her that he tried not to take sides, like when you talk about the war. Because he knew my sister and I were growing up in America, and that if he started to say things that he probably felt, like he you know having grown up partially in Japan and stuff, and I think his parents were clearly on the side of the Japanese, that he probably felt that it would be too conflicting for us. So he didn’t talk about- typical of a lot of these people who have gone through tragic, difficult experiences. He very rarely talked about it. If not any- to me, it was always the silence, because I, of course, asked him when I would do U.S. History stuff. I would ask him, you know, “You were there. What was it like?” You know, I mean, not of course knowing what the hell I’m asking. But I would ask him, and he would just say to me stuff like, well, there probably were better ways to deal with it, but “It is what it was,” and things like that.

AS: I heard mostly around- around him, people around him would tell me stories like, he had to go out and after the bomb was dropped I know he had gotten- he was just on his way out because it was early in the- it was like eight or nine in the morning, I think that when the bombs were dropped and he was ready to go out and he was tying his shoelaces, and apparently the bomb dropped. And from where he was, he was closer to the outskirts of the city so- which is good. And where he was up on a mountain, probably sort of like this [points out MHC classroom door to Mānoa mountains], maybe a little lower, not- not as high as these mountains, on a mountain side. And he said it’s more like rays and I think he got burned, like here [motions to right side of face] and on his knee [points to inside of left knee] because he was tying his shoe. It was like, these really strategic burns. But the whole house, you know. I think the roof- they said the roof blew up and came down. That’s what I remember.

AS: And I’ve gone to my grandmother’s house that survived that, but you see burn marks on the beams. You know, weird, very strange burn marks. You’re like, looking at this and there’s these, these huge scorch marks on the beams. Or you look at the floor and it doesn’t like- why is this dark over here and

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stuff like that. And then I- later when I- I didn't think about it as a kid, you know, I was seeing those and I'd say, "Well, this is strange." And you'd see little metal things or some kind of things stuck in the beam that- really deep. And you'd wonder, how did that get there, you know, type of thing. I remember as a kid just exploring my grandmother's house and those kind of things. So I know- and my grandmother happened to be going to get my father's coat for him to leave. So they had all their clothes in the basement. They were all prepared to go in the basement for any of these air raids. So she didn't have- nothing harmed her, but he went out the day later to help people look for survivors. Of course, they never found people, but- cause they thought they could, right?

AS: So he- I'm sure he had seen a lot of terrible experiences, you know, just doing that, but he never shared that. Never, never shared that. I've- I've only seen it later by, you know, watching other movies and documentaries and I've been to Hiroshima several times and I've gone to the museum there a couple times already. So I know- I suspect I know what he experienced, you know. And of course, his friends, we had aunties when even was I a kid and I was going to Japan. I knew they were friends of the family and they had their stories. You know, I have one lady who was a friend of the family long time, owned a little store at the bottom of the hill from where they- the were there were and her- she had- she was married, had two daughters. Her husband got TB [Tuberculosis], you know in those days they would always get TB, had passed away. The daughter got TB, one daughter, and passed away and her last daughter went out that morning. They never found her. And I just remember this lady always going as long as she could, she'd get up five o'clock in the morning, bicycle to the graves of her family and basically do flowers every morning. Apparently, that's what she used to always do. So she lived till she was way into her nineties. I remember that because every time we went back, we would go visit her. And she was always still there, you know. So, those kind of stories I mean I remember hearing.

KN: Do you still have family in Hiroshima?

AS: Hiroshima? Yes, I have some cousins. I guess they would be cousins and their family. But we've gotten very distant. I mean, I only know my cousin and I don't know their kids. I met them once when they- or twice when they came to visit in Hawai'i, but I don't- the connection isn't as strong as you know, of course, in those days. But we do have family there, yeah.

KN: Do you think that they're taking an interest in that same sort of history that you did when you were younger, or it's hard for you to say?

AS: I don't know. I don't know them that well enough to know if they did.

KN: We can move on, I guess.

AS: Sure.

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KN: Thank you for sharing that.

AS: Yeah.

KN: First of all, that was incredible. But as far as your maternal side of your family, where did your grandparents on that side live?

AS: They lived in Kure. That's Kure city, the naval port. My mother's side- my mother's [clear's throat] family was well-to-do, [clear's throat] landowners. So, the joke has always been- they- my parents were arranged marriage. And it was a second marriage for my father. His former- his first wife passed away young. But it was a second marriage for him, but- so he was much older than my mother. But- if it wasn't for the war, they probably never would have been matched. But you know, it's a time when there's not very many men, never mind that the options weren't very good. So her parents probably said, this is as best as we can get type of thing. And I think the thing was that there was money in this family, my father's family. So that made her feel at least she'd be taken well cared of, that type of thing.

AS: My mother was the youngest of twelve. You know, it was those days. And she was the youngest girl particularly. So she was like- in Japan, they call it ojousan [young, unmarried woman; daughter]. She was like babied by everybody. Her older sisters. I remember my aunties, she had a couple of aunties [sisters]. She only knew the aunties [sisters] that were closest to her, the ones that were older, they were so far off they were gone practically while she was growing up, already married and off, that she never really got close to them. So we never got close. There's there's probably family all over that I don't even know about but, I know of them, but I don't- I've never met them. But she had two sisters particularly that she was very close to, and they would baby her. I mean- I mean yeah, that's the way I looked at it. It was always constantly- when they got together, it was them telling her you need to do it this way, you need to do that.

AS: And then of course, later, they became- as they got older, I saw them becoming more friendly toward each other. But my mother always had that you can't- "I can't go against what they say, though." She couldn't- right in front of their face she could never say to them "No, I don't agree with you." She would just say, "Oh, okay, okay," and then she would just you know. One of the stories would be- when I had my son, my auntie that was still alive, she was in her- almost a hundred, but she said "Oh, good, you had a boy. I'm going to send you something," right. So my mother's like, getting all nervous and stuff. And she sent us this- the koinobori [carp streamer/banner]. You know, the—Boy's Day, the carp to fly. But she sent us the major, big, jumbo-

KN: Flag?

AS: That yeah, that goes out like, you know, in a shopping mall kind ones, you know she sent us a huge one and we're looking at this going, "There's just no way we're going to be able to fly this anywhere."

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You know, we're talking, we just need a few feet it's fine, you know? But she sent us one that's like about, I'm going to say the- the biggest one was about ten feet long. Huge. And so I- my mother- but she kept bugging my mother. "Did they put it up yet? Did they put it up yet?" So my mother bugging- bugs us, "You gotta to put it up, you gotta put it up." You know, so we finally had to get someone, you know, we had to hire somebody to build a pole to be able to put it up. And it was not- it was a big production. And even our neighbors were going, "What are you doing?" I'm going, "I know, but we got to do this. Our auntie's insisting." I took pictures and we sent it to her, and then she was satisfied. But we never- after that, we never put it up again. It was just-

KN: I was just about to ask you, how long did it hang above your house?

AS: Just that one time. Even my husband, who's Filipino, he's like- "She's crazy!" You know? And I go "I know, but what are we going to do? We got to do it. My mother is not going to stop, you know." And I knew that there was that bond that my mother knew she had to- she had to- if her sister asked her, she got to do it. She can't- That was the expectation already. So my mother was from that end but she came here not knowing anything really of what she was getting into. And she actually never- she tried to learn English, but unfortunately, us silly kids we used to make fun of her all the time with her English. She- I remember her going to the Japanese school. They had an English as a second language class and she did that. So I think her understanding became better. But her speaking never happened, she could never speak. She could write. She had learned Roman letters in, in school, I guess. So she knew how to do that. So she knew how to sign her name and that kind of stuff in English. But she was very- remained very, very Japanese, spoke mostly Japanese, you know. I'm glad she did, because that's how I retained the language, because I had to continue to converse with her. So that was good.

KN: Your mother had a Japanese name. Did she ever take an English name?

AS: No.

KN: For any purpose, no? *No* Cause my grandma lived to be a hundred. She passed recently, and she took the name Vivian as her English name.

AS: Yeah, my mother- All my cousins, actually, which we called aunties, and they were older cousins, that's why. They all did that. They have Japanese names but they- I only know them by their Auntie Janet, Auntie, you know, Dora, Auntie, you know whatever, Irene. But I know they didn't have those names. Those were- they chose those names.

KN: But your mother just stuck to her given name.

AS: She never- my mother was not American or she was- she's never- I mean I don't identify her as an American at all, because just knowing her and you know living with her, you know, for so long, she was

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definitely Japanese. I mean, she was all Japanese. But you know I think one of the things I was surprised but I also realized is- when I went away to college- my father passed away when I was seventeen. He had cancer. And I- you know when I look back on it, it's probably related to the atom bomb, although he smoked and all those other things. He- he developed cancer later and he did die relatively young, in his sixties. So— she became a widow quite early. So I remember going to college- she was a widow, I went to college- I was in high school, a senior in high school when my father passed away. I went away, but when I came home I would tell my mother- especially when- after I graduated and I started to work and things like that. “You know Mom, did you- are you staying here?” Cause it was very clear she was- she always used to tell us that “I gotta make sure that you and your sister make it, and are able to make it on your own before-” you know, that's her feeling because she felt that that was her duty as a mother. That my father told her this before he died, that “You gotta make sure,” you know, cause he didn't see us through till the point that we were, you know, like adults, working, that kind of stuff.

AS: So I think he felt responsible and she felt that she had to take that on. So after I started working, because my sister was already working and established in L.A., I told her, you know, “Mom, would you rather be like in- would you rather move back to Japan?” I mean, and by then, she actually said, “No,” and I was kind of wondering why. And the impression I got from her was, is that going back to- she got so used to the life here already, and it was so much freer for her than to go back to Japan and be under all the scrutiny of whoever it was, probably her sisters mainly, because she would be around them most of the time. That she didn't feel- that she felt Japan was great to visit and she could go and shop and do all kinds of stuff there and- but “No, I don't want to live there anymore.” She had freedom here, that she could do what she wanted here, and she liked that. And that's why she dec- she ended up, though I really thought that she would be much more comfortable in Japan, to stay here. And I know, and that triggered even my decision because my father, actually ended up having, when he had cancer, treatment in Japan, in Tokyo.

AS: In that- in those days, the choice was, when you went to- when you were diagnosed with cancer in Hawai'i, that treatment you would either go to Boston or Tokyo. That was th- believe it or not. So of course he chose Tokyo because he had more connection there than- there was none in Boston.

KN: Sure thing.

AS: For him I guess, you're right. And I think he also had contacts, you know, because he was- business-wise he still had contacts in Japan. So even if he wanted to get a good doctor, he knew he could get help, everybody's help with that, you know, that he knew. And we had a couple of doctors in the family on my mother's side, at least, you know. So they would have helped in getting him a good doctor and all that kind of stuff. So he passed away in Japan, he died in Japan. And the funeral was in Japan. So I never went to his funeral cause I was still in high school and my parents were big- the Japanese, education very important, you can't miss school. So I just listened to them. You know I think I would have preferred to be there, but yeah I didn't really know anybody even though I was seventeen. I'm-

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seventeen in those days is nothing like seventeen these days so I just listened to what my parents said. And my mother said, “You have to stay and you have to go to school because your father wouldn’t like it if you left school to come for this.”

AS: So, I never did go through- I never did that, but he was- there was a- in Japan, they have what the families, especially if you’re relatively well-to-do, haka [family grave]. They have a haka. They had a haka in, my grandfather had- where he was, my grandfather was in Hiroshima, at a temple there. So my father went there. But later when I became more, you know, independent I told my mother, we need- you need to consider, because she was going to Japan every year. Her reasoning was to go haka mairi [ohaka mairi], which is to go and visit the grave all the time and make sure everything’s okay. But of course she also did her side trips to have fun and stuff, which is fine of course that’s, that’s her prerogative, but that was the reasoning. But of course, I could see as a geriatric social worker, I could see that this is not going to work out as she gets older. So I said to her, “You know, mom, you’re not, you’re not going to be able to do this forever. And I’ll tell you right now, I’m not going to Japan every year. I mean, I would love to do it, but I know I probably won’t do that every year to do what you would want me to do, you know? So let’s bring it over here.”

KN: Find a way to make it sustainable.

AS: Yeah, make it sustainable and bring it here. And she actually agreed to it. I was concerned whether she would even agree to it. But she said that’s a good idea. So we made- there were actually, there was a family grave in Hilo too, because I had two uncles and an aunt [that] died in infancy. That- there were graves I remember because my father, when we used to visit our family in Hilo, we had an auntie who established herself in Hilo. We used to go visit and he used to always take us to go see the grave, the haka there, that was there, that was set up. And I think that my pa- my grandparents set up and my father actually put a new stone up because the old one was getting too old and he put a new stone up. So, I went- I also went and got that because that’s the same family, right? So I got- I told my mother, “I’m going to go get the one in Hilo too. Bring the one from Japan.” that would have been my grandfather, my grandmother, my father, and my father’s first wife was there. And I got- went to Hilo and I got the my two uncles and an auntie. They were all under a year old, but that- and we put it all together and we made a haka in Valley of the Temples. There’s a haka garden in the back by the- we thought that was the best there. So we got- my mother got some plots there. We had a haka made over there. So everybody is there now, so at least I can continue to-

AS: And we were doing it while my mother was, you know, still, you know, here as long as she could, I would take her over there and then we would, you know, put flowers and do what she needed to do there. So, I know that was a relief for her, at least so that she doesn’t have to worry- to take one worry away from her, right. That’s important to her. So that’s why I knew that that was an important thing to do for her.

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AS: And a funny story that I have of that is that when we were purchasing the haka, the lady at the Valley of the Temples, she's telling us, "Oh, okay, this is the ones that are open, the plots that are open." So my mother chooses a plot. "I want one near the street," she says. I'm going to- so I said, "Okay, then go one back, with second row." You know, she goes, "Second row, yeah, second row is good. Buy the one in front." And I said, "What? Why do you need the one in front? We don't need two. We only need one for a haka." She goes, "I don't want anybody to be in front of us." And then later when we would go to visit after the haka was made she would say to me, "See, they have a nice yard." Okay, it's your money mom, you know, I mean, but that's the kind of the mindset that was there, you know? And to this day, I always tell people when, you know, even my son, when I go over there, "You know why this is empty here? [laughs] We own this, but it's because grandma wanted a yard." [laughs] She didn't want anybody to take the front one there and be in front of her.

AS: Yeah, so- and I would have never thought of that. That's not the way I think at all, because I've grown up here, you know? I mean, so it was interesting. It was always an interesting thing. And even now, I don't know if you know my house down the street here, it's- I'm on O'ahu Avenue, and I'm- if you come from the traffic light, East Mānoa, it's the fourth house on the left. So it's got the big yard in the front. And that's, of course, my mother- and my mother said- you know, many people have said, we've even had people say you could build a house right there and you could rent it out, da da da. Of course, it'd have looked terrible if you did that. But my mother would also- we had do- we had always had dogs and I used to tell my mother, "Can we fence it?" Nope, got to have a nice open yard. So she would not allow it. So even to this day, even though my mother's gone, I feel like I'm going to get struck by lightning if I put a fence in, you know, I mean, because that's kind of how I feel because she felt the need to have that lawn. And of course, everybody always compliments on the fact that we have that huge lawn there.

KN: It is rare, to have a nice patch of grass and no fencing.

AS: Yeah, she insisted on that. So I have to always leash my dogs. But that's all right- I, you know, I can't- I can't- I can't do it. You know, maybe my son will do it, I don't know. But I can't do it.

KN: You feel the guilt?

AS: Yeah, I can't do it. I can't do it. And I'm lucky my husband agrees that you know, that's the way we should keep it, you know? So. But those are the kinds of things I always, I always think of when I think of my mother. I actually came back because it was pretty clear, she was in her seventies then. She had an episode of sciatica, you know, where she became immobilized and she couldn't move. And though she was living in that house by herself with her dog, she actually- up till then I would ask her every time I came home, "Do you need me to come home?" You know, because I already knew that my- again, my father, when he knew he was dying. And even when I was seventeen, when I- last time I saw him- oh no, it was through letters, he used to write. He did say to me, because I was already looking at

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colleges and in fact, I looked at colleges in Japan, in Tokyo too, because I knew my father was there. So he vetoed that. When he found out I was doing colleges in Tokyo, he said, “No, you can’t be doing that for me,” because he- I believe he knew he was dying, so he didn’t- he didn’t see that that was practical for me. So he said, “You go to the school that you want, you do what you think would make you happy. The only thing I ask is that you take care of mom.” And of course, at seventeen, I always thought, “That’s crazy. Of course I’m going to do that,” you know? I mean, of course. But you don’t know when you’re seventeen what that means. You don’t, you don’t have any idea what that means until it happens.

AS: And of course, I was up there several years and I was working and everything, and I- every year I came home I would ask my mother kind of like, “What do you think? Do you think you need me to come home?” And she would always say, “Tch tch Don’t come on my behalf. No, you don’t have to come.” You know, “You’re fine where you are,” type of thing. And when she had that episode, that was the first time she didn’t answer me. She said no- she didn’t say anything. And when I- that was the sign to me that I said to her, “Okay, you know what, mom? Give me a year. I’m going to settle things up there and I’ll come home.” And she didn’t say, “No, no, don’t do that,” you know, or anything. She just said, “Okay,” you know. And then from then it just switched, where she was every time I talked to her, it’s like, “So when are you coming home?” And I said, “Remember? I said, give me some time, mom,” you know, type- it became that, you know. Yeah yeah all of a sudden it changed. You know, it was really very interesting, but that’s the reason why I came home. It was one of the hardest- I would say, going away was har- was hard, but it was fun. Coming back was the first hardest- the hardest thing I ever did in my life.

KN: How old were you when you moved back?

AS: About- let's see, I was thirty- three, I think? Thirty- four?

KN: So you had a pretty established life?

AS: Yeah, but I knew- I mean, I know friends of mine who would never done that, you know, and their parents wouldn’t expect them to do it, you know. But I knew I had to do that, you know what I mean? It’s like, that’s why I kept asking my mother, that’s why I knew, so that’s how I did it. But when she said, she didn’t- when she didn’t say anything to me against it, I said “I better, I better come home.” The other way I also felt is- it just happened this way. I ended up becoming a social worker, but I- a geriatric social worker, in fact- that I also felt, I think- here I am counseling other people on how to take care of their parents and all this kind of stuff. I- I can’t be a hypocrite and not, you know, when she can’t- just because I want to be independent and I- because I really- I never got homesick when I went away. Probably because I was sheltered in this little bubble here in Mānoa, you know, it was nice, but of course, I never knew how nice it was until I went away. And you get all these different experiences, and I enjoyed the different experiences. But you never know how nice it is- weather wise, everything, you just never know until you come back and you say, “Oh my God,” you know.

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AS: And of course, when I was in winter- I went to- I went to Boston, I actually went to Boston. Yeah, so talk about different- I really wanted something totally different. It's that anti like- you know, all this stuff, this is too nice or something, I don't know- as a kid, right? I want to go somewhere totally different. So that's what I did. I went somewhere- really loved it though because it was just so eye opening for me. But I remember, especially toward the end of my time there, come February, now, I'd be sitting in this cold snow, slush, you know everything. I'm going, "What the hell am I doing here?" You know, "This is crazy. I'm from Hawai'i," [laughs] right? You know? So what happens is- basically, I just- I didn't realize it was hard to come home because of the relationships and all the other emotional stuff that was going on. But the other part was I also realize that "God, this is really nice," you know? Like, I didn't have to prepare for the winter. I didn't- any of this stuff. And then, of course, eventually I met my husband and we started a family and stuff, that took over and it- I think about- if I was like up there and I did that, that would be- oh man, that would be awful.

AS: You know, I would always think that. And now I'm kind of the opposite. I mean, I've reached this point in my life. I have friends still up in the mainland and back east and I go to visit, but I tell them "I can't come in the winter though," you know, the best I can come in the fall, it's beautiful there. I can call or the spring or summer, but I'm not coming in the winter. You know, there's just no way I can come in the winter, you know? So it's just kind of come around and then- but at the same time, not having lived here the full time, I do have a deep appreciation of Mānoa, you know, I mean, and having been here and of course, my family for getting this place at Mānoa so I can live here, you know, because otherwise I don't think I could ever have lived here, you know- again, because it's just- you know, it's too ideal for a lot of people, right? I mean, so, you know, that's the other thing. So— yeah. So that's kind of how it came around for me, at least from in Mānoa, for me. And I learned a lot, too. Coming to— coming to the Center here because, mine was just observation, you know, as a kid and even- later, even as an adult.

AS: And I'm involved, like, at the Japanese School because I sent my son there for a year and then for judo and stuff like that. But- and I could see they needed help so I jumped in and I started helping. So I'm a board member there now, but I continue to help them because I do have a tie here. I think, you know, that you- it just came around kind of like. And I, you know, one of the people- people say, "Why are you still here?" because most of the people are parents of the students. And then, you know, the students graduate and go on. And so- cause it's only K through five and they'll, they'll wonder why I'm staying on. And I just say that well, you know, I'm a member, I'm a- I'm an alumni and I know this school from when I was- I went in the days when it was kindergarten through ninth grade and I graduated there when I was in ninth grade, you know- at Japanese school. And it was thriving then. I mean, you know, and I could see it's not as much now, but it's a different- you know, it's a different world. So we have to adapt.

AS: So what I can do to help it, I'll do that, you know, and I see the history there too, where it's, you know, it was started by Japanese immigrants, first generation that came from Japan, settled in Mānoa eventually, and most of them farmers. And they wanted to- they were afraid their children were going to

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lose the language and culture. So they— they got- started up this school and eventually purchased the land, their prime land, of course, but they purchased it from Liliu‘okalani Estate and they built buildings, brought another building from Mānoa School. Apparently that- the old building is from Mānoa School, that’s there. It’s- they purchased it for— I think they purchased it for a thousand dollars and it cost us six thousand dollars to just move it over to that spot. It used to be, I think, out, you know, where Mānoa- close to where- I don’t know exactly where, but where Mānoa School is. But that’s where they- that older building is from Mānoa’s- Mānoa School. And then the newer building, the cement building is one I remember when I was going there yet. Probably I was like- first or second grade. They built that building. I remember that, because they had a big, you know, celebration, inauguration, all that kind of stuff there. So- and we used to have all kinds of events there and everything like that- Japanese. And it was all Japanese- related, you know, type of thing.

KN: So before that building went up, when you were in first grade, was the school still there? And it just wasn’t the same facilities, or was the school nonexistent?

AS: No, it was still- no, the school is a hundred and- it’s- 1910 was when first started. It was established. So it’s hundred what, hundred? *thirteen* Yeah, years. November it will be hundred thirteen. That’s the- when it was established. But it wasn’t- it wasn’t- at first in another location I think somewhere else, probably a building- I don’t know exactly where. And then they came here- I think, in the late twenties. That’s when they purchased that property. The farmers, they got a hui and then they purchased that property. And the amazing thing about that property is that most Japanese schools- there were a lot of Japanese- this was not the only Japanese school and a lot of communities that did the same thing- Japanese communities on the islands, different islands.

AS: This is the only one that has survived. Most of them were disbanded, if you want to say, taken over by the U.S. Government during the war. And this is the only one that somehow survived that, and I would say- put credit onto that. Those Japanese men who, farmers- that held on. That the government pressured them to hand it over during the war, but they just played dumb or played like, I don’t- we can’t do that because of legally or whatever. And they just held off, held off until the war ended. And then they made it into a community association so that nobody can go to one- you, you can’t go to a person to finagle getting out of- you know, to get the land or get the property away from, you have to go to an association. So they changed it into an association then. And now, that’s why it’s lasted. And, you know, it’s- of course it’s cash poor but, you know, property assets, yeah, rich. You know, place. But it’s meant to be for the community, I mean and that’s what it is. So that’s why it should stay that way. You know, at least that’s the way I see it. If I can do anything to help with that, I would like to do that. So that’s sort of- when my son went there, I was asked to be on the board. So I just kind of stayed on there for- until then. Just to- and I see myself as just providing continuity because it does change. The board changes quite frequently, you know, every few years because of the turnover with the families, which is fine. I mean, I don’t think that’s a- you know, it’s inevitable with a situation like that, it’s just to make sure that it just at least stays for- to its purpose.

KN: It's always going to be the pillar.

AS: I like to think that, you know, in a way. I like to think that I guess, you know, but- and I think that's sort of that, you know, as you get older, you feel like you want to, of course, establish your roots, but you want to do something for it. You want to leave something you know, behind. I mean I'm— older, but I'm not that old yet. But I still think it takes a while to set up a legacy like Mary did, you know, and stuff like that. I think it's- if I can do something, I would be- I think that's a great thing.

AS: So that sort of happened, I guess it happened when I had my son and I decided to send him there. He didn't do so well in Japanese school. That's not his thing, clearly. But when we put him in judo, that was perfect. I mean, he needed that, because that's what he- he's just a little aggressive boy. So he needed to be in that kind of a situation. So I mean, but if judo wasn't there, I don't know if we would have gone there, you know, I mean, for that. I knew about it because I went there and I knew judo was there. So that's why I could- I immediately think, okay, we got to go do that, you know, for him, because he really needs it. He needs to let out his whatever that energy is, you know, in him. So, yeah. So that's sort of- yeah, that's sort of where, where I'm at at this point, I guess.

KN: So would you consider the- your involvement in the Japanese school to be one of the big, I guess, achievements or roles that you've played in your life?

AS: Oh, definitely. Yeah. Yeah. Well, you know, I came home, I found jobs, worked here as a social worker, a long-term care social worker and then later hospice. But, when my mother clearly started to need more help, I stopped working, and then I just concentrated on care-giving for her. And because I had the background, I knew I- you don't wait till she becomes totally incapacitated. You kind of ease into it, so.

KN: Right it's a normal thing.

AS: Right. And treat it- and I was living on- when I got married. We built behind that house. So we have a home behind there too- a little smaller home, of course. But, in fact, it's my mother again. You know, she was not crazy about me marrying a Filipino guy. She didn't know, so- and she had her biases there's no question. And I resented it, of course, at that time. But as- I'm glad that I kind of just stuck with it because, she was against it. But what she said was, "Okay, if you're going to do this then you just got to build a house in back." You know, that's what she said. You just, you gotta live over here, you know? And- I could have said, you know, "No way. I don't want to live with you anymore. You're such a pain in the neck," or something like that, right? But I said, "Okay," so we just, you know- I talked to my husband, we said, "Okay, we'll build a house in the back." My husband has the same- he knows family's very important. So, you know, he had the same kind of thinking so that- it wasn't an issue. But I would say that in that way, it's sort of like we- it just sort of happened that way, right? I mean- okay, then that

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was happened. And when she clearly started needing more help, she lived in the big house, we lived in the small house in the back but that's okay, You know, she— when she started to need help I moved in and then- and that was- you know, the signs- she didn't want me to come in for- initially.

AS: So when I said to her, “You know mom, I think it's time.” I think there was an episode of food poisoning, she ate something bad. Yeah. So I told her, “I think this is a good time for me to move in.” And she didn't- again, she didn't say anything. So I said, “Okay, I'm going to start moving in Mom,” you know, “I'm going to stay here,” you know? And we kind of did it gradually. And then finally it just- she just got used to me being there. I took over her medications, all that kind of stuff, because it's clearly she couldn't manage all of that, right? So- and eventually, my husband and my son started to move in too- I mean, we didn't do it all at once cause I think that would have been too much, even though the house was bigger, you know what I mean. But we eventually just kind of moved in and we were eating with her, that kind of stuff. It became more- a family situation. But I felt that that was the part that- eventually, of course, she came around, you know, she's still her tough self, but she— she was able to live to a hundred and three at home. She passed away at home and that's sort of the way we wanted it, you know, so it worked out really well. But all the way till the last day she was walking on her own, you know? So, you know, I was able to- because I had stopped working I would take her to the Y [YWCA]. She would go for her aqua aerobics. She would go- I got a personal trainer for her to do- just balancing and just strengthening exercises with her. So she was able to continue to live independently at home. So that was what we wanted, you know, ideally.

AS: And if anything happened, there was one episode where she did have what they called a TIA [Transient Ischemic Attack] a tiny- a tiny stroke. And it was- I noticed something was funny with the way she was walking. So I called her doc and her doc said, “Take her to the emergency room.” They checked it and they did- you know, I think a regular X-ray- the CT [computed tomography] scan they couldn't find. But with an MRI [magnetic resonance imaging] they found some incident. But it was the kind of thing where the doc at the emergency room asked her, “You touch your nose and touch my nose,” that type of thing. And she would go like this, and then she'd go like this. And even she would say “Why is it going over there?” You know, like, you know, so clearly something was wrong that- cause she could have done that before this. So- but that was when she was like- that was 2004 so she was in her nineties? Yeah, when that happened- when that happened, so. But we're able to keep her pretty mobile for a long time till hundred and three. Yeah. But that was my- I looked at it as that was my job, you know. I mean, you know, that was what I was there for. You know that's- and motivating me was always, you know, she wasn't easy you know, I mean, you know, as you can imagine, right? I mean, she wasn't easy. So but the motivation I had was my dad. I had already promised my dad I would take care of her, you know, so that's why I knew I had to do that.

AS: You know, even when I know- even my sister. There were times my sister, cause I was complaining to her right, would say to me, “You know, maybe we should think about another arrangement,” and stuff like that. And I said, “Oh Akemi, you can't do that. You got to figure this out. You got to figure out

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another way somehow, you know?” And so it would always be something that—it’s- that would motivate me. I would say ultimately that was the biggest motivation for me to continue to do it that way until, you know, and we were fortunate that she did not have a major fall, break a hip, you know, those kinds of things. Nothing, nothing like that happened for her. So, she did fall many times, I mean, she’s had shiners and everything, you know? And it’s awful, but, nothing. She never really broke anything. She got cuts and scrapes, but she never broke anything, which was always the best thing. You know, it’s good. We were really happy. And, you know, it’s funny because I think about it— she- we had checked- we had her evaluated. Even when her nineties they- she had her bone density checked and the doc said that, “You know, your mother is pretty amazing, actually, because she would be in the category of pre-osteoporotic.” So she was headed that way, but she wasn’t- even in her nineties. She was not- yeah, her bone density was pretty good. So that’s why I wasn’t pushing getting her into the wheelchair early and even using the walker. I would prefer her to have used the walker earlier than- she never used it. When we brought it out, it would get put away.

KN: It’s too much trouble.

AS: Yeah, and that’s the thing is that one time I don’t- I think this was earlier. This is like in her, her nineties. She did fall, I didn’t know it though. She did fall and she said, “Something’s wrong,” you know, “I slipped on the stairs.” And I’m going, “What happened?” And she goes, “I don’t know, but I think I’m okay.” And then that night, she went in heels to a dinner we went to, and then the next day she told me my leg- my foot hurts. And I said, it’s the same place that you think you hit or something when you fell?” I said “We better go get it checked,” she had a fracture. And she’s just walking around in heels, you know, the day before. [laughs]

KN: They don’t make them like that anymore.

AS: No, no, no.

KN: It sounds like both of your parents had a profound impact on the life that you’ve lived. *That’s right* How you’ve ended up doing the things that you’ve been doing. Even why you’ve ended up here at the Heritage Center. So to wrap things up, I just wanted to ask you, if you could think of a major event that happened in your lifetime that affected the way that you view things or really changed your perspective that you can think of like, one significant event.

AS: Major event, huh? Hmm, well I guess I would go back to moving back here. It was the hardest- I mean, I would probably say I was probably in some kind of form of depression for a year, the year adjusting back here. And I had to get- try to get myself out of that somehow, you know. But, reevaluating yourself, you know, from coming from a totally different situation, but still it’s- it’s home. I mean, in a way it’s home, but it’s different. Doing that and making an adjustment to that was probably the biggest event for me, I would say. And getting out of that I guess, yeah? I mean, that was the main

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thing to be able to be able to figure out how to get out of it. And become a person that's, you know, useful.

KN: Functioning.

AS: Yeah, functioning. That's right, that's right, that's right.

KN: I think a lot of people can relate to that as even if just a short stint on the mainland or spending a month in a different country and then coming back here, the homesickness that you feel like when you get back, it's very different.

AS: Yeah.

KN: Or if you spend a long time somewhere else and then return.

AS: Right, right right right right, right.

KN: I feel like we can all definitely relate to that at some point.

AS: Right. Because, you know, I was went to of course, Boston where everybody's going "Can't you go somewhere closer to your home," you know like, "Why are you coming for all the way here?" You know, I says, "I just wanted to go someplace different." You know, I would say stuff like that, but- and then eventually it turned into- because I was staying there "Are you crazy for staying here? I mean, why are you not going home to Hawai'i?" You know, that's what I was dealing with all the time. And, of course, the other one was "You can't swim?" or "You can't- you're not a good swimmer and you're from Hawai'i?" You know, I get all that all the time, you know, that kind of stuff.

AS: So dealing with that and then- then coming back because I had my own, you know, issues as far as, you know, my, my family obligations and everything coming back. I'm fortunate I had friends also there that supported that. They knew that that was coming, you know. So nobody like, you know, made it hard for me to come back. You know, I also think that, man, if I had, like, a boyfriend or a husband, that would have been really hard because I don't know if I could have them make that adjustment too, you know. So- but I didn't, I was- I just didn't at that point.

AS: So, I actually thought that I probably would end up on one- I was working at hospice for a while as a social worker, so I met a lot of people who went away, came back, and they had the issue of- if they were still single, they had to look for, but they had different tastes then, you know, in men, you know, or something like that, you know, where it wasn't the same as when you were a kid, of course. You know, high school when you left, right? So, you know, very hard to go out with guys, you know, and that- that kind of stuff. You know, I remember going through a period of that until I met my husband, you know,

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and I always felt, “Oh, phew,” you know, I mean. Yeah, I didn’t have to go through that much of that because I know that’s- that seems to be- I hear that story a lot from people. Other people that, you know-

KN: Spent time elsewhere.

AS: Yeah, yeah and return, and return. And you know, and then, you know you’re getting- now you’re getting a hodgepodge because it’s so mobile. Everybody’s going all over the place now. So people are all having that same- but in those days it wasn’t as common, you know, to go away. You were going away- most people were going to California, not to the East Coast, in my day. Now you have everywhere. They’re going everywhere now. So it’s- it’s not as much of an issue. But in my day I would say that it was more of a big issue because people were wondering why I was going east. You know, I mean, there’s a lot of good schools in the West, you know, I said, “I don’t want to go to- everybody’s going to the West,” I want to go to the East. You know, I mean, I like- If I can get in someplace, I want to go to the East, you know. So that’s how it- And I’m glad I did because I met some really quality people. I mean, I have some good friends till this day that, you know, from the East that I really like. And we always, you know, make fun. We have jokes going back and forth. “Oh, that’s because you’re from Hawai’i,” and, you know, that’s and that’s, “Oh yeah, because you guys are east.” They used to make fun of my accent, all that kind of stuff. So, you know.

KN: My accent, what about Boston?

AS: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, really! That’s right, that’s right. Exactly, so- right.

KN: Well, on that note, Akemi, I think we can wrap it up.

AS: Okay.

KN: Thank you so much for answering all the questions and telling us so much about your life.

AS: Okay, thank you Kanoa.