



EAST-WEST CENTER  
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## EAST-WEST CENTER ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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# Benji Bennington Interview Narrative Part 3

2-3-2005 and 3-1-2005 interviews in Honolulu, Hawaii

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The **East-West Center Oral History Project** strives to capture the Center's first 50 years as seen through the eyes of staff, alumni, and supporters who have contributed to its growth.

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**Benji Bennington**

2-3-2005 and 3-1-2005 interviews in Honolulu, Hawaii

**PART 3**

***EWC Arts Program/Art Gallery***

The Arts Program goes back to the Bitterman years, no further back really. When we had the Cultural Learning Institute, Verner Bickley and then Mary Bitterman were the directors of that institute. They started out with the Performing Arts Program, and it was Richard Via who headed that. And then they had a New Zealander who came in and was doing exhibition training for faculty at small museums with no budgets.

(laughter). So it was sort of like, it would be like the old ITI -- one of the training programs that he was running for CLI, for Cultural Learning Institute. So that was the beginning of the Arts Program.

This would be in the '70s. At that point I was working in the Public Affairs office and the vice president of the East-West Center paid me extra money a year to work with the Arts Program even though I was in Public Affairs. So the East-West Center paid me another five, ten thousand dollars a year to do some exhibitions.

So, I worked with Jim Mack, who was the one who was in charge of the programs where they were putting together some exhibitions, but he was mainly, as I say, training people from small museums. We were already beginning to get an incredible collection of art here. So they wanted me to get involved in getting some of that out on the walls. So that program goes back really, really far.

In the late '70s and '80s, I used the big lobby on the first floor for the exhibitions. But, you know, there's no doors to close, there's no security, all that kind of thing. When Oksenberg came in as president [*in 1991*] -- and he looked at the quality of the

exhibitions we're putting on and the contacts that we have in Asia and the Pacific for exhibitions that were suggested to us... Like we had one [*exhibition*] of Taiji Harada, a Japanese folk artist, and there was only one person in the East-West Center who I told the value of that exhibition to, because it was in an open area on the first floor, in the lobby and the foyer. It was those two rooms. We took over the whole thing. That exhibition was worth more than a million dollars.

It was just open to the public. All these things hanging on the wall as I said. And the Japanese didn't even tell me how valuable it was. But I had this big three-ring binder that cataloged everything in it and it's captioned to make sure we had the right caption on everything. And in the back they had a list of all the paintings. And everything was in Japanese, but it had money, which was in yen. So I added it all up and then called the bank to find out what the yen rate was, and that's when I found out it was a million dollars and I almost sunk through my seat. 'Cause I knew he was well-known, but I didn't know his stuff was that valuable (laughter).

And that's when I told the vice president for the finance section. I showed him what I had, I had a picture of everything, this is the thing that says the value and, I said, I'm not telling anyone else. I haven't even told, you know, the director of my program or anything. I'm only telling you that I've added this up and this is over a million dollars worth of art there. The Japanese were covering the insurance because they knew the value of it. Often the East-West Center would cover the insurance for a lot of the exhibitions we had, but they didn't have that kind of value.

That was why, when Oksenberg saw some of the kinds of exhibitions that we had -- and he saw a number of them -- he decided -- he'd looked in at the auditorium that we had

*[where the gallery is now]* and in four months here he'd only seen three things happen in the auditorium. It was not very well used. And he looked at what the exhibition was doing, and he says, "You need a separate gallery." He says, "We shouldn't do this to the people who are loaning these things." And so that's why we got the gallery.

Although I should've gotten involved in what they were doing on the first-floor renovations sooner, he did involve me. He very much got me involved. Yeah, as to how to put it all together, what I wanted for walls, what I wanted for ceiling. But if I'd gotten involved earlier on, I would have pushed for the bookstore. Even Oksenberg couldn't convince the fiscal people to do that. You know the four glass doors we have as the entrance to the gallery? On the opposite wall, I wanted them to have a window wall, and door for our book sales. To put the bookstore opposite the gallery, and to make it obvious that the East-West Center is about education and research, too, not just about culture. But they had already been working with the architects long enough that they had planned it differently, and they weren't willing to change it. And I still think that was a big mistake. You know, it should be easier for people to find where the bookstore is. And the Friends *[of East-West Center]*? I mean they could have gotten more people involved because the Friends could have put their T-shirts, cards, whatever, so that we'd have all those things on display and the Friends would love something that would be more in the public view. So I was sorry I could not get someone in the vice president's office to take it to the architects and get them to change that. Because I think it would have made a very nice entrance, too, to have it. You know, with window walls on both sides of the entry and it would have shown off the other part of the East-West Center, which is education and research.

Actually, the gallery has a pretty good international reputation for presenting exhibitions as a way to learn about culture. And that is really the whole reason for our existence. Like the exhibition that was over Christmastime, the Hong Kong contemporary work. They did work on an East-West relations type of theme -- the artists who were asked to create in relation to that. But they were contemporary artists that were not reflecting being Chinese. It was a very, very contemporary exhibition. Versus what's down there now, with lots of masks, and mannequins with costumes on, and that type of thing. And we've always worked with our alumni groups. When we get something from another country, we sometimes work with alumni to help set it up here. We also work with the current students. Like with the exhibition that's down there right now. Because we didn't have the expertise on Thailand in the arts office, *[gallery curator]* Michael *[Schuster]* got one of our Thai students who happens to be a Thai dancer, to come down and make sure we were putting on the Thai dance costumes correctly, 'cause it's different enough from an Indonesian one. Although we probably would have gotten it 80 percent right, we might have attached something wrong, or something on the arm or, you know -- or backwards, or that kind of thing.

So she came down, and then she noticed other Thai things that were in the exhibition and said, oh, you should not have these two character masks next to each other. You know, because they fight. And, you know, that's not -- oh, you shouldn't have this or that here. So she went around and educated us on things to do with Thai. Patti *[Dunn]* knew what to do with Indonesian masks and costumes -- whether these two worked together, etc.

I remember when we had an exhibition on the Solomon Islands, we had some things that probably should not have been collected by the collector from the Islands, because they

had a lot of spiritual meaning. We had one spider web-covered rock which is something a shaman would have used, and people normally wouldn't see it. It wouldn't be appropriate to have it out in the public. And we had several Solomon Islanders in the student body and we got them down there to ask, "Is it all right to do this?" And they were enough Westernized that they didn't say eliminate anything, but they did have comments on how we could show off things. And they asked if they could have a small ceremony, because we had this highly spiritual element.

So these are the kinds of things that we do. We also, if we do something from another culture, we always want people from that culture to come and interpret it. And we want them to be able to perform if they can, or give talks, or do demonstrations. Remember when we had the Chinese, the 15-year-old Chinese girl here with the -- she had monkeys and all kinds of things that she'd done [*Wang Yani*]. You know, it was quite an education for her to come. And kids here were saying, you have a one-person show for a 15-year-old?

She attracted so many students into the gallery. And on Sundays, the students would come with their parents. Because they said, "Mom, Dad, this is a 15-year-old girl and she's got her own exhibition. You've got to come and see this." And we set it up on Sundays so that she would do demonstrations, and we took her into schools. You know, we had her demonstrating in the gallery so people could see how she painted. We want to do that with the education side of the Arts Program all the time.

### ***Arts Program/Outreach to Local Community/Hawaiian Community***

I think the first local community we got involved with was the Filipino community and we put on a contemporary Filipino exhibition, the first one that had ever been done here.

And the Filipinos were very good at getting the money to support that. We have a very nice catalogue of that exhibition.

And some Hawaiians came to that and I got approached by Hawaiians who said, "Would you be interested in working with us? We have not been successful at getting exhibitions anywhere else." And I said, oh, absolutely!

The first one was totally people who came out of the University system and the community who had noticed the kinds of exhibitions we put on. It was really, really very interesting and very educational for me to work with the Hawaiian group because I'm the curator of the gallery and artistic decisions are one of my responsibilities.

They've had such a hard time getting recognized as contemporary artists who are Hawaiian in ethnicity. They feel that their Hawaiian-ness comes out in what they do, and I agree. But they have never been able to get a grant from the State Foundation; they've never been able to get recognition from the State Foundation [*Hawai'i State Foundation on Culture and the Arts*]. The State Foundation has things for folk artists, so Hawaiians can qualify with ethnic things in the folk artist category. Or they could qualify for the contemporary artist, which has no ethnicity involved. They had nothing that went in between. So they hadn't been successful with the State Foundation and they had never shown anything at the University.

The University Art Gallery -- I regularly go over there when they have sessions about this and take UH to task -- they're aware of New York and Paris, but barely aware of local things, and only through Tom Klobe [*UH Gallery director*] and our Exhibition Program do they have any good contact with Asia and the Pacific.

I've quarreled with them a number of times that they should at least be aware of their

local people. So as I said, we first started with the Filipinos. The Hawaiians saw it, they came to us, asked us if we could do this. And we set it up -- I said yes, we will do this. What we did was, between them and myself, we selected who would be the artists. They had a long list and I agreed with them on their choices because I knew enough about the community. I agreed with them those were a very good range of artists. There were a few I didn't know, but most of them I knew who they were and what their work was like. I did not curate the pieces. I curated the artists that got involved.

This is why it's difficult for a traditional curator to consider this approach. As I say, I was satisfied because I knew they were good artists. But then what I had to do was sit in the gallery whenever an artist was there to see what they were doing, so we could talk it over and I could understand what they were doing. And then if they wanted to do something that would not be appropriate -- like one of them said, "Oh, we can put this up with double-sticky tape." And I said, "No, you can't! Double-sticky tape does not exist in this gallery." I said, "You put it on the wall there, that's a rug wall. How do we get double-sticky tape off a rug? You can't do that."

So, you know, I had to stick around because that's what they were used to, sticking things up on walls and you paint them again when you're done. Well, you know, you can't paint, repaint a rug wall. And as I say, it was also to get them to explain to me what they were doing so I could do a better job with my docents, to do a better job of explaining it to the groups that we would bring in. And the first one that we had, the Hawaiian exhibition title translated as "resistance." It was important to them and it certainly related to the difficulty they'd had in getting an exhibition at all.

I went in and talked with Charles [*President Morrison*] about it. And I said, "We've



picked the artists, I don't know exactly what each artist is going to do. I said I don't see that any of them, even with that theme, are going to come up with something that's negative or confrontational, you know. And they didn't. The most confrontational piece in the exhibition had a Hawaiian flag pinned to the floor and she had written -- she had burned in some Hawaiian in the white stripes as part of her resistance. And she had a Hawaiian spear that went into it. Beautifully presented. Very beautifully presented. I said, you know, I think that's the toughest one for someone because it had a flag involved. And we only got one person who called Charles and made any fuss about having that there. And he was a Hawaiian who was a veteran. And he was upset that in the name of being Hawaiian they would do that to a flag. We invited him to a series of six public forums where the artists came in and talked about their concerns. And we invited him to come and talk with the artist. The artist expected somebody to maybe react like that. He never attended one of them, but all those public forums were well attended by Hawaiians and other people in the community. Some of the parts of the forum were done in Hawaiian language and I said, that's fine. I said, like a lot of other people I don't speak Hawaiian, but if you want to do it in Hawaiian language as part of "resistance," go for it.

So a couple of presentations were done in Hawaiian and Hawaiians in the audience answered in Hawaiian. The rest of us didn't know what was going on, but, you know, that's part of a cultural experience, not always understanding what's happening around you in language. I didn't have any trouble with that and the Hawaiians were happy. You know, they didn't feel confronted because I wasn't confronting them about that. I think two of the six public forums we had Hawaiians crying because they were just able to say

these kinds of things and see that people were concerned about it.

If we're going to bring visiting artists in, we want to get involved in it enough that we can put forward some of the things that they wanted to say about their work. I'm a *haole*, I'm not a Hawaiian, I'm not a Thai, I'm not an Indonesian. I'm someone else that's very interested in it, may be knowledgeable about it, but I'm not someone of the culture. So we feel it's important to bring culture carriers in to be able to talk or to demonstrate or dance or sing.

### ***Hawaiian Renaissance***

Even back in the early years of the East-West Center, through the years, through the decades, we have had various ways of reaching out to the Hawaiian community to be part of the East-West Center. In the early years, we had a number of Hawaiian degree students and one of the things that they learned -- I'm thinking of Ho'oulu Cambra, a well-known *kumu hula* [*Hawaiian hula teacher*] in her later years. When she came to the East-West Center, she was Zanetta Richards. That was her English name, and that's what she came in as. She left the East-West Center as Ho'oulu Cambra because of the cultural consciousness that was raised by being involved in the East-West Center program.

I can remember a Nathan Oppenheimer, who's now the state historian in Hawai'i. I can remember at the orientation program we had out at Camp Erdman. Because I knew he was Hawaiian, I asked him in one of the sessions, "Well, could you talk with some of the rest of us about being Hawaiian here because this is all new to them and you may be one of the first Hawaiians they've met." He says, "How do you know I'm Hawaiian?" And I said, "Nathan, that's part of your application." I think I was Admissions Officer

then, so I knew what he was applying as. I said, "I think it would be interesting for you to share with the new students. They're not going to have that many opportunities to talk to somebody who's Hawaiian."

And when he left EWC two years later, he was Nathan Naʻpoka. And as I say, he's now the state historian. We didn't have a lot of Hawaiians, but those are two examples of what happened with Hawaiians who got involved with the East-West Center, because they really came in as an American on a good scholarship, right? And because they were Hawaiian, they could declare Hawaiian as their language because it had to be a non-English language that you had to be proficient in, so Hawaiian is non-English, right? But then they were pushed into learning more about what it is to be a Hawaiian, not just get a scholarship that's going to get them a degree from the University of Hawaiʻi.

This was in the '60s. When I came in the '60s, I remember, I would occasionally listen to the radio, and the only people you heard speaking Hawaiian on the radio back then were grandma- and grandpa-type voices. You did not hear young people talking Hawaiian.

You did not. You know, Hawaiian really was in great danger of disappearing. Very great danger in the early '60s. But because of programs at the East-West Center, things that were developing at the University, things that were developing in the community itself, the language is back and is strong.

I mean, I remember when I used to get contacts for my eyes and one time I'm sitting there and this young woman and her son come in. Her son's about five years old and they're speaking Hawaiian. And I was just, it just felt so good. At one point in our Indonesian gamelan rehearsals, two of the local kids were Hawaiian. Both of them fluent speakers

of Hawaiian and once in a while when they wanted a private conversation, they said, "Would you excuse us, we want to talk to each other in Hawaiian," and they would talk to each other in Hawaiian.

The East-West Center, you know, helped a little bit with what happened with that whole Hawaiian renaissance -- because, you know, we were showing Hawaiians that, yes, we recognize that culturally you have something to say.

It reinforced an awakening I think they were beginning to move into anyway. To be reinforced by something at the University, if we were in the '60s, or in the later years the East-West Center as a separate institution gave them even more validation for the kinds of things that they wanted. And I remember David Faust, who was an East-West student in the early '60s and who went on to be our orientation officer at the East-West Center, and then he went to Kamehameha Schools. And he took a lot of what he had gotten involved with at the East-West Center to Kamehameha Schools because at the turn of the '70s, Kamehameha Schools was still into the thing where you didn't speak Hawaiian, you didn't learn Hawaiian, you didn't do Hawaiian dance.

It was people like David who came in -- as a *haole* -- and said this is not right. I have just spent all this time with the East-West Center, and we are celebrating culture, not repressing it. So, you know, he was one of the people that helped with the changes that went on at Kamehameha so that they eventually got so they really were teaching the language, celebrating the language, celebrating the dance, all of that. Which they were not doing at the beginning of the '60s.

### ***Encouraging Nontraditional Artists***

Oh, we were very important -- the community was very important to the East-West

Center, and we were very important to the community. Because this was a community that just became a state. In '59. Hawai'i became a state one year before we, the East-West Center, existed. All these things were new to them: The relating out from Hawai'i to other cultures; getting this influx of people from cultures that were part of what the local people are, and cultures that were not, but were similar; also getting all these mainland *haoles* that came in but were very culturally oriented to being involved with things. Because we [EWC] were always interested -- culture always went along with whatever else you were doing. It's never separated.

So the East-West Center has been very important and has grown with the community in realizing about and supporting things in the community. As I say, like when we worked with the Filipinos, that was the first exhibition they'd ever had of contemporary Filipino artists. We worked with the Hawaiians and that's the first time they'd had it. I used to be president of the Hawai'i Craftsmen, a very good organization spread out through all the islands. Folk artist-type people like Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders don't very often get involved with it. So I interested them in one exhibition that the East-West Center hosted where we made an outreach to nontraditional artists, because these are people -- the weaver, the quiltmaker, all these kinds of people -- who are not used to competing to get into an exhibition.

At one of the Annual Fiber Arts exhibitions organized by Hawai'i Craftsmen we specifically pursued local folk artists. We worked with them. We actually had two curators -- the Craftsmen did, had two curators. We actually brought in an East-West Center alum from Guam to work with the nontraditional artists that were not used to putting something in to be chosen for an exhibition. You know, if as a folk artist you're

asked to give something to an exhibition, it's assumed to be accepted (laughter). And the Craftsmen weren't used to that. So that's why we had two curators.

And for the more traditional work the Craftsmen organization brought a curator from the mainland, because they always brought in their curators from outside. For our big Fiber Arts annual exhibition, they brought in a curator from the mainland or, when I was president, at one point we brought someone in from Japan. Because they [*Craftsmen*] want to help enrich the local artistic community by bringing people in from other places. Which is, of course, what the East-West Center does all the time, right?

So as I say, we had two curators. We had the traditional Western-type curator who came in from Portland. And the one from Guam.

And the American artist was very interested in what we were trying to do, to reach to the nontraditional arts that we had in the community. And he was fascinated to work with the guy from Guam to see, you know, what we were looking for. And he quite agreed with the guy from Guam and it all worked out well. Deacon and I -- she was one of the gals who was helping with the exhibition, another East-West Center alum, Deacon Ritterbush. We had picked the artists, not the pieces. Because we knew whatever you got from the artist would be good. And so there was the Western curator and the curator from Guam judging things here. And they all agreed that what the artists brought in was as good as anything they were getting from the more Western tradition artists.

Yeah, it was very interesting. Craftsmen didn't really do it again, but I think they would if they had somebody who would push to do it, because it was a very successful exhibition. It was a very nice exhibition. Everybody was very pleased, and the more Western-educated and -oriented artists were very interested to meet the ones that were

the traditional artists, which they weren't used to interacting with. So, it turned into a typical East-West Center exhibition because it was on the East-West Center grounds.

This is why I was pushing for it.

### ***Smithsonian Folk Life Program, 1989***

I said I wanted to talk about the Smithsonian, and maybe we can just end with that particular one. The cultural underlay of what happens at the East-West Center has always been extremely important, and to me, most obviously in the student program, because culture is structurally nurtured in the student program. Not as much in the research program, not as much in the professional development program. But definitely in the student program.

So when the Smithsonian Folk Life Program wanted to feature the state of Hawai'i on the 30th anniversary of our becoming a state, in 1989, they logically worked with the Hawai'i State Foundation on Culture and the Arts. But the SFCA was in, you know, a space about as big as this room. I mean, they had no room to put up someone else from Washington to help with the program, so they asked us if we'd get involved.

And we said we'd be very happy to do that. Culture Learning Institute [*Institute of Culture and Communication*]. We could provide a space and the Smithsonian guy could have access to secretaries and machinery and all that kind of office stuff for, you know, a small monthly compensation to EWC. The Smithsonian's Richard Kennedy was at EWC for about a year, talking with everybody in the community about what should Hawai'i have represented at the festival. You know, what cultures, what arts, from those cultures. Who are the people that should represent those arts from those cultures? You know how complicated Hawai'i is culturally.

I was very much interested in it the project. Richard got all of these ideas set up, he'd done all of the curatorial work. He had the Hawaiians saying this is what we think is important. He did a marvelous job working with the cultural communities in Hawai'i. So when they get to the final selection of what they're going to do and who's going to do it, they bring out all the other staff people from the Smithsonian in Washington. And the East-West Center hosted the whole group. We took over one of the conference rooms here and we had all the presentations made of what should be presented in Washington to represent the state of Hawai'i.

And the only two non-Smithsonian people there were myself and EWC alumnus Ric Trimillos, who at that point was on the Board of the Smithsonian Folk Life Commission. He's very, very, very well recognized around the world for cultural things. Since he was here, of course they involved him. We sat there with the technician, the architect, and all these different kinds of people -- everything that you might need to hold a festival.

It took half the day to decide who could represent an art tradition. In every other state such selections usually took only about 45 minutes. But here in Hawai'i, we're very culturally mixed. So if Tom Chin is recognized by the Hawaiian community to be the best lei maker then he can represent the Hawaiian community. But he doesn't have a Hawaiian name.

In every other state, I mean, if they had a Laotian thing in Minnesota, all people representing Laos traditions had to have a Laotian name. This is what the Smithsonian was looking at. Well, how can you have somebody with a Chinese name representing a Hawaiian tradition? How can you have somebody with a Filipino name representing the Portuguese? (laughter).



And we said, Look, we have all these groups here. Each group talked about what they felt ought to be represented, who were the best people to do it, and these are the names that they came up with. These are the people that are best at it. And it literally took us a half a day to get the Smithsonian group off the decision that they were used to doing in every other state.

But they still had some problems with *haoles*. What do we do with *haoles*? There are people like Mary Jo Freshley (an EWC alum) who is the number one Korean dance teacher in the state. She has a Korean name, she won't use it. She says, "I'm a *haole*, it's idiotic for me to use the Korean name." But the Koreans have given her a Korean name because she's recognized **in Korea** as the best carrier of the tradition. (laughter). I mean, she's a blonde *haole*. Or a former blonde *haole*. They just said, "We can't have her representing the group."

We said you can't take the Korean group if you don't take her. They won't go. (laughter). And the other *haole* that they had problems involving was me, because they decided they ought to involve me in something, too. I thought, hey, this is great. I'd like to go. And so I ended up actually being the food interpreter.

When we got to me being the presenter with the food program, I did it in the typical East-West Center way. And what happened was that they said they had never had the food demonstration area turn out like it did for Hawai'i. Because what we ended up having was a kitchen that everybody came to. It wasn't a demonstration area. It was a kitchen. So when the Filipina was up in front talking about what she'd prepared, we had the Okinawan and Hawaiian in the back preparing things, and they're trading ideas. "Well you know, my grandma told me this is what we do with this." "Oh yeah? Is that what

your -- "

And so it all got very, very cross-cultural, just like we do here -- that was my role. That's what I saw my role as. And so I was constantly pulling them in together. And then we'd get people stopping by. I remember I turned around one time and looked at who was in the back helping himself to some food. And I turned to the audience and said, "Well you might wonder about that young man in the background. Let me introduce you to the governor of the State of Hawai'i (laughter), who knows where the good food is. And he's here cockroaching it. And if you don't know what cockroaching is, this is a local term..." So, you know, we had great fun with everything.

But the Smithsonian supported our kitchen approach. I mean, they just loved it. And we had big, big crowds come. And later they told me they spent about three times as much money on food with our cooking demonstrations than they'd ever spent. But they were quite willing to do it because of what was happening. At one point we... let's see, Puerto Rico was the American territory also featured at the festival. And we pulled in the Puerto Rican cook (laughter) to cook taro the way they would cook it, and then we had the Hawaiians and the Puerto Ricans talking about different ways of doing other things. At one point we pulled in one of the Native American groups that was there. They were talking about how they used one of their kinds of vegetables and their spices and stuff. Smithsonian staff said they'd never had that cross-cultural involvement. Never had that happened before. Kennedy and some of the others told me later on that, "We have a new word at the Smithsonian in the Folk Life program. We talk about how can we "Benji" this?"

(laughter) I thought that was so funny. How can we "Benji" this?

Summer of '89. Oh, it was a marvelous experience. I'm very impressed with what the Folk Life Festival puts together. And I thoroughly enjoyed getting to meet some different people in Hawai'i who I wasn't aware of. A lot of them I did know through various arts programs that I'd been involved with, but I think that what the Smithsonian did there, what the East-West Center tries to do, is the best part of what Hawai'i is.

## **Ties That Last**

### *Alumni Network*

One of the people from my group, dating back to '62, is Willie Chan Chee Kheong who's from Malaysia. He came here to get his master's degree in agricultural economics because he was working in that kind of field in Malaysia and as a Chinese-Malaysian he particularly had to study something of significant value to his country. He was Mr. Personality. He went back to Malaysia (he did work for the government) which is one of the requirements of the EWC scholarship. If you've gotten a visa to the U.S. to get your education, one of the requirements -- and the East-West Center agreed with the U.S. and their home countries on this -- is that you will go back and work in your country for a minimum of two years. We did not want to add to the brain-drain, because we did believe in "you are going back to your own country" kind of thing.

So Willie went back and he worked for the government for many years. Then he went into public relations, because he really was Mr. Personality, and he was very comfortable with all these different nationalities because of EWC and knew all these phrases in a zillion languages, and all the rest of it. He finally moved into working in the movies. Now he is the president of the International Company of Jackie Chan, the kung-fu artist in Hong Kong. They're not related. Jackie is Shanghai-born and now of Hong Kong

while Willie came from Malaysia. They're definitely not related, they're not even the same kind of Chinese.

But he's the head of Jackie's business and they set up a fund, a Jackie Chan Foundation Fund here in the U.S. which supports the EWC Arts Program. And whenever they come to town, we always have a great time together. You know, I've known Jackie Chan courtesy of Willie since Jackie was 19 years old, and he didn't speak English then. I met him on his first trip to the U.S. with Willie. And it's been a very, very nice continuation through 40 years of having Willie as a "brother."

Another one -- Tony Chunn, the American from Philadelphia -- now runs a program with more staff than the East-West Center has. His program offers assistance to high schools throughout the greater Philadelphia area for students who are having problems. Not academic, but any kind of social or psychological types of problems. They set up all these different kinds of programs. They grow every year because they're doing such a good job of this.

There are people who ask me, "I'm going to be in Kuala Lumpur. What's a good hotel to stay in." And I'll go, gee, I don't know hotels. "Why don't you know hotels?" Because I stay with my Malaysian friends when I'm there. Or I stay with my Indonesian friends. Or I stay with my Thai friends, wherever I am. You know, knowing hotels and that kind of thing is not part of it. And I'm not unusual amongst the students, particularly from the '60s. You know, whenever we travel anywhere, we travel in a different way.

This was reinforced to me in relation to Korea. At one time I was working down in the Public Affairs office and I was planning the programs for all the important international visitors that came here. I'd set up the appointments, you know, in the East-West Center,

the University, the local community, whatever. One time, a Korean businessman came on the program. And as I'm doing my spiel, you know explaining what the East-West Center is and da-da-da-da-da. He says, "I've done a study in Korea. I've been looking at the advancement of young Koreans as they move up in the ranks in business and in universities, etc." And he says, "I see a distinct advantage for any Korean to have been involved in the East-West Center program. They are advancing faster and further."

In Korea. Advancing faster and further than any Koreans who have been educated at some other American institution or university. He was thinking of the East-West Center as a university. But, you know, he'd made a study and seen that that was true.

Another time I went to Korea to help with the interviews of all the possible Korean students that were applying for EWC scholarships. I spent five days in interviews with potential students. And of course, I knew a lot of Koreans because I'd been at the East-West Center forever, right? So the American Embassy assigns me an embassy person to be my escort in Korea, because I don't speak anything but Korean food, right? I don't speak the language or anything, right? (laughter). Typical of all of us around EWC. We speak food from various countries and can say hello, and goodbye and a few other things. Anyway, they assign me this young man from the embassy to accompany me around Seoul. And the third time that we went to a Korean home for a meal, the guy from the embassy says, "I want to know what the East-West Center is because I have lived and worked in Korea for two years, love the country and people and think I have some close Korean friends, but I've never been in a Korean home before, ever."

It was a *haole* guy. Spoke Korean. You know, he'd spent time there. He was very involved with the country, but the kinds of contacts that East-West Center people,

through the types of programs we have, particularly the student programs, gives us those kinds of entrees. And you know the houses we were going to: Obviously some were very rich, lovely, lovely homes with lots of antiques and everything. But by the time we got to the third one -- we went to one of my classmates' houses, and this one had the kitchen and the bathroom out in the backyard. A university professor not living high-on-the-hog at all. To be invited into that kind of home, you know, to me it was perfectly logical. I was comfortable to be there. They were comfortable to invite me. And this is something that an American Embassy person would never, ever have gotten close to.

And he says, "What IS the East-West Center?" Same thing as the Korean businessman did from another viewpoint, you know, when he said he was noticing that Koreans who had an East-West Center experience were advancing much faster. That's one of the cultural types of things, I think, that happens with the East-West Center.

### ***EWC Marriages***

I mentioned before that we didn't have a lot of married students then, but a lot of them got married while they were at the East-West Center (laughter). And I kept track of that because I was Alumni Officer, and I could do that, not only because I knew the people but because the women changed their names. At least 50 percent of the marriages at that time were between people of different ethnic groups or nationality groups. A Chinese Indonesian marrying a Malay Indonesian is, you know, just as significant as some of the others. It's quite, quite different in their country.

So, it was sometimes an ethnic group, sometimes on a national basis. So at least 50 percent of the women married. And then when I looked at who I knew -- the men had married, too -- probably more of them (laughter) had married someone from a different

culture. So we had combinations like Pakistani-Japanese. That brought the Pakistani woman's family from Pakistan to try and stop it. You never knew what we were going to get involved in.

We had a very successful Thai-Micronesian couple. They lived in Micronesia, he's been governor of Ponape. Bermin Weilbacher, that's his name. His Thai wife has been head of English programs for the whole island of Ponape. Then, at one point he said, "I should go to Thailand. I need to find out what your culture is like." And so they spent four years in Thailand. Bermin speaks Thai and he looks like a northern Thai. I can remember one time when he was driving me around in Bangkok and we were stopped at a traffic light, somebody who was selling Thai newspapers, Thai food -- whatever -- wanted to get him to buy some of it, but he didn't particularly want some of that. So then the Thai seller goes "Hey, you're pretty uppity there, with a foreigner sitting in your car," and all this kind of thing. (laughter) His Thai was good enough to counter all that. Also, he actually ran a TV show of Hawaiian music. In Thailand. So he was very well-known in Thailand. I mean, a lot of them recognized him because he had a TV show of Hawaiian music.

## **EWC's Impact**

### ***On Career, Perspectives***

I think that I'm most proud of how extensive and expansive my cultural understanding has become from being involved in many of the facets of the East-West Center. You know, from the early years when we didn't even have a building yet to my continued involvement with alumni. That my *'ohana* here is still made up of people that have East-West Center connections from the early '60s.

I'm proud of the fact that I think it has brought my family -- which was already doing things like living in various countries -- has brought them into a really international world, even though they're not involved in a program that does that. As I say, my youngest sister married her Indian professor.

Her daughter -- half Asian Indian, right? -- came to live with me when she was 19.

Actually, her mother had asked me to do that -- they lived in Minnesota and there're not too many Asian Indians there. Or at least there weren't back in the '70s. My niece had a very negative viewpoint of being an American who had Asian ancestry. And she had a very tough time in school, because people usually would look at her and figure she was either American Indian or Hispanic. Because that's what they had around them. They didn't have communities of Asian Indians. So she came here with a very negative view.

Well. It was just an incredible turn around for her.

The first week she was here, I thought, OK, I've got a 19-year-old. Teen-agers like to go to malls. So I took her to Windward Mall so she'd know where it was, because it was within walking distance, easy walking distance. And we're walking through the mall, and some local lady comes up to ask where something was in the mall, and she looked at the two of us, and she, of course, asked Haji where was such and such a store.

So I answered, but Haji's standing there with her mouth open. You know, that really made a dent on her, that the community was different. She said, "I would have been ignored on the mainland. It would be like I didn't exist. They would have talked to my mom and not to me."

And she says, "I just can't believe that the woman talked to me instead." So I got Haji involved in a lot of things to do with the East-West Center while she was here. She had



come out for, you know, a few months or half a year or something like that. She ended up staying here five and a half years. She met her husband at the East-West Center (laughter). He's a professional musician, an Ecuadorian Indian.

And, you know, when she left here, she was very proud of her Asian ancestry -- of her heritage. And we'd had talks and I said, OK, now I've got you positive on being an Asian who happens to be an American *haole*, too. I said, don't forget the *haole* part. And she doesn't. I mean, she's got a website, she's got her own business of bringing in silver jewelry from India. She works with several communities in India now to produce this jewelry that she designs and sells.

And on her website, when she explains who she is and what she represents, she talks about her Asian ancestry, she talks about her European ancestry. She says that one is just as important to her as the other. And she talks about her experience in Hawai'i, as being what opened the world up for her.

Yeah, I have another niece who married a Cuban. And so I have a half-Cuban nephew. Grandnephew. Another niece came out to visit me for six weeks and stayed for three years, three and a half years. Gorgeous *haole*. Blonde *haole* with brown eyes. You know, she came here and was just totally nonplussed by Hawai'i, because she came from Gary, Indiana, right? (laughter). To Hawai'i. When she first came here she dated only *haoles*, but gradually expanded her range there.

Her color range, yes. And culture range. When she left here, she went into Peace Corps, ended up in Africa in Peace Corps for two years. In Zaire. She'd gotten her degree in teaching English as a second language at the University of Hawai'i. After Africa she went to Japan for two years to teach English. And she and her husband now -- they have

two sons, and they want a girl. So they decided they should adopt a girl, and they're adopting a Chinese girl. They're in the middle of working out all that with an orphanage in Beijing.

### *Not a Melting Pot, a Tossed Salad*

People talk about a melting pot, and we're **not** a melting pot. And we shouldn't use the word. We're a tossed salad, because we keep our own ethnic background or backgrounds -- celebrating different parts of our identity at different times. We're not melting away anything. Look at our Hawai'i media. They comfortably identify somebody as Chinese-Hawaiian. I don't know if any other states do that kind of thing in their media. Probably the most they do is say Asian-American, Hispanic-American. You know, that kind of thing. From day one, the East-West Center has never been color blind. We want to make sure we have all these different people involved. And we talk about it. And so it's not color blind, it's celebrating differences.

I can remember (laughter) when we lived in the hotels [*early '60s*]. They hadn't built the dormitories yet. And an American friend and I had been out to eat or something and when we came back Barbara's Thai roommate, Paitoon, said, "Oh, some guy stopped by to talk with you. I think he wanted to get a date with you." Barbara says, "Oh! Who?" And Paitoon couldn't remember who it was. So Barbara says, "Well what did he look like?" And Paitoon, I mean, this is like the first month she's here, says, "All Americans look alike." Barbara just hit the ceiling. "Hey, wait a minute. We have blond hair. We have red hair. We have black hair. We have brown hair. All you guys have dark hair. We've got all these colors. What color was his hair?"

She didn't even see what color his hair was. Because it was all so new to her. To cope in

this language, to cope in someplace different. You know, all the Americans looked alike. And I know when I came here, I couldn't tell one kind of Asian from another. I mean, I'd never met an Asian to have a conversation with until I came here. I didn't even know about Pacific Islanders until I came here. You know? I didn't know by looking at people what they are. I didn't know that Chun was different than Kawasaki. I mean it was a foreign name to me. It was all the same. But, you know, of course, this is Chinese and of course that's (laughter) Japanese.

You know Hawai'i and East-West Center, when we're operating the best we can, we pick up on all those things in all the best ways. You know? That's a tossed salad and we celebrate everything.

**SEE PARTS 1 & 2**