



EAST-WEST CENTER
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EAST-WEST CENTER ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Mary Bitterman Interview Narrative

9-15-2008 interview in San Francisco, California

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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.

Co-coordinators: Terese Leber and Phyllis Tabusa

Narratives Editor: Susan Yim Griffin

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Mary Bitterman

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Personal Background

I'm Mary Bitterman, a fourth-generation Californian, who has spent most of my adult life in Hawaii. Even though I've been "working off island" since 1993, my husband and I remain permanent residents of the Aloha State.

I grew up in the "Valley of Heart's Delight," better known now as Silicon Valley. I attended grammar school in San José, high school in Monterey at Santa Catalina School, and my first two years of college at Dominican University in San Rafael, California, where I focused on the classics. In my sophomore year, I decided that I should put the classics aside and go to Washington, D.C., in the hope of preparing for a diplomatic career.

I attended Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in my junior year but graduated from Santa Clara University because my father had become ill just before I was to return to Georgetown for my senior year. Fortunately, he returned to good health, and I was able to wend my way back east again to do my M.A. and Ph.D in Modern European History at Bryn Mawr College outside of Philadelphia.

Life Before EWC

Arrival in Hawai'i

I finished my Ph.D. in the early 1970s and began working as the administrator of the Hawai'i Environmental Simulation Laboratory, a research program connected to UH Manoa's Environmental Center and funded by Ford, NSF and the State Office of Environmental Quality Control.

And then, in 1974, after working a couple of years as project administrator and research associate in Hawaiian history, I became the general manager of the Hawai‘i Public Broadcasting Authority, a statewide public television network. In that position, I was the youngest and only woman among the general managers within the PBS station system. Given those “unique” characteristics and with Senator Inouye being the chairman of the Subcommittee on Communications of the full Commerce Committee, my public broadcasting career was put on “fast forward,” and I was given unusual opportunities to participate in national meetings, represent PBS abroad, and testify before Congress on public-service media matters.

Life at EWC

Board of Governors, 1975

My involvement with the East-West Center began with a telephone call from [*Hawai‘i Governor*] George Ariyoshi in 1975, asking me, as he asked four other Hawai‘i residents, to serve on what was a newly chartered Board of Governors. From the Center’s start in 1960, the UH Board of Regents had served as its governing body, complemented by annual visits of a National Review Board appointed by the Secretary of State in Washington, D.C.

By 1975, the Hawai‘i State Legislature recognized that the importance of the Center was such that it should have a Board whose experience and range of contacts would be wider than those of the UH Board of Regents -- and the UH Board of Regents, for its part, acknowledged that it had more than enough to do in advancing the mission and programs of UH and was not really able to provide the timely oversight that the Center required.

The new Board was to have 15 members and three ex-officio representatives – five

individuals were to be appointed by the governor of Hawai‘i to ensure sensitivity to Hawai‘i’s interests as the host site for the Center; five were to be appointed by the Secretary of State; and the remaining five were to be selected by the 10 appointees. Ex-officio members were the governor of Hawai‘i, the UH president, and the assistant secretary for Educational and Cultural Affairs (later the associate director of USIA for Educational and Cultural Affairs).

It was very exciting for me, the director of Hawai‘i Public Broadcasting, to join the EWC Board with four outstanding leaders from Hawai‘i: Kenneth Char, then CEO of the now-defunct but then-robust Aloha Airlines; Herbert Cornuelle, then president of the Dillingham Corporation; George Kanahale, Hawaiian historian; and Russell Okada, then deputy director (and later director) of the Hawai‘i Government Employees’ Association (HGEA).

We were matched with a group of distinguished appointees by the Secretary of State – individuals with diverse backgrounds ranging from stockbroker Julia Walsh and China historian Lucien Pye to Wisconsin attorney John MacIver, former Senator J. William Fulbright, and Edgar Kaiser, son of Henry J. Kaiser who created not only the Kaiser Permanente Health System but the region on Oahu now known as Hawai‘i Kai.

We, the 10 appointees, had the task of selecting five additional people for service on the Board. The presumption had been that the “final” five would include a few more mainland people and perhaps another Hawai‘i person or two. We had serious discussions about the choice before us, and we decided that it was critical – and precedent-setting – for us to identify five outstanding individuals from the Asia Pacific region. And we found extraordinary people: Dr. Puey Ungphakorn, who was then vice chancellor of

Thammasat University in Thailand; Ms. Tai Yu-lin, head of the Regional Language Center in Singapore; Mr. Ibuka Masaru, the co-founder of the Sony Corporation (along with Mr. Morita Akio) who always attended Board meetings with his colleague, Nishiyama Sen, a distinguished former NHK broadcaster who reported the story of the first man on the moon; Dr. B.D. Nag Chaudhuri, vice chancellor of Jawarlahal Nehru University; and Ratu Sir Kamisese K. T. Mara, the prime minister of Fiji. Our ex-officio members were Governor George R. Ariyoshi, who was often represented by his Special Assistant, Mr. Susumu Ono; UH President Dr. Fujio Matsuda; and Assistant Secretary of State John Richardson (later, associate director of USIA for ECA, Dr. Alice Stone Ilchman).

EWC Board Chairman

I served on the Board for five memorable years, the last three of which I chaired the Board. (Herb Cornuelle, our initial chairman who had a well-known reputation for encouraging younger people to assume positions of responsibility, was the individual who nominated me.) The person who served as vice chair to both Herb and me was John MacIver, former head of the National Review Board.

Toward the end of his administration, President Jimmy Carter appointed me director of the Voice of America and I had to step down from the EWC Board when I moved with my family to Washington in late 1979 for the next year and a half.

Reflections on Board Tenure

My five-year tenure on the EWC Board was an invaluable experience. I developed strong personal relationships with my fellow directors -- from Hawai'i, the mainland and the Asia Pacific region -- and with the management, research staff, participants, students

and alumni of the Center.

I have wonderful memories of these years and reflect on the tremendous opportunity we had as the initial board to help shape the Center's governance process going forward. My colleagues and I were especially pleased and proud that we had established a custom that could not be easily ignored of having the five Board-elected members come from the Asia Pacific area. Our feeling was that the hands of the clock couldn't be turned back; that our successors would find it unacceptable to substitute Americans for those Asia Pacific "seats." After all, how could you have a Center promoting cultural and technical interchange between East and West and have the policy board consist of people exclusively from the West?

Do I have any negative memories of the Center during my Board service? Not really. The only serious problem that reared its ugly head from time to time was resource deprivation. The Board and management of the Center had to continually argue for Congressional funding, reminding members of the vital cultural, economic and strategic arrangements between the U.S. and the Asia Pacific arena. While Washington problems were largely related to the Center's financial situation (and, of course, occasionally, to its programmatic focus), we were always grateful to Senator Inouye for taking up our cause in his characteristically professional and successful manner.

(I should mention, however, a very sad development within our first two years of operation as an independent Board that took place far away from Washington. Our esteemed colleague, Dr. Puey became the target of extremist Thai students who seized control of the Thammasat campus. Dr. Puey had to flee Thailand and was taken to Britain. In the course of suffering a violent attempt on his life and worrying terribly

about the fate of his faculty and students, Dr. Puey's health deteriorated and he was felled by a massive stroke. He never recovered and died several years later in Bristol, according to his son whom I met who served on the faculty of University College London. We were all greatly saddened by the departure of our dear colleague who was beloved by generations of Thai students.

It is especially tragic when the lives of people of peace are ended by acts of senseless and horrendous violence.)

Do I have any other specific recollections from those days on the first Board of Governors? Given the fact that the Center was founded in Hawai'i and that Hawai'i and her people served as the host culture for the Center, I recall that the five of us appointed to the Board by Governor Ariyoshi felt an enormous sense of responsibility for ensuring the Center's well-being, integrity, professionalism, academic quality and service to humanity.

Institutional Transitions

Director of Institute of Culture and Communication

I had a second formal "intersection" with the East-West Center, from 1984 to 1988. EWC President Victor Hao Li asked me to combine and direct two formerly separate institutes (the Communication Institute and the Culture Learning Institute); the successor institute was known as ICC – or the Institute of Culture and Communication. I very much enjoyed the challenge of working with fine colleagues to organize a research and activity program that brought the two units together in new and meaningful ways. We placed a strong focus on the arts because we felt that every nation and society, however small, large, rich or poor, could contribute materially to the Center's creative life and aim

of mutual understanding.

The highly successful Hawai'i International Film Festival was situated within the administrative purview of the Arts Group. (John Charlot headed the Arts group and was ably assisted by individuals including Richard Via, Jeannette Paulson, Bill Feltz and Benji Bennington.) We had a second unit focused on the humanities (and directed by Wimal Dissanayake) that highlighted the contributions of writers, art historians, philosophers and scholars of religion. We had a Social Relations Group (with David Wu as convener) which directed its attention to sociological and historical aspects of development in the Asia Pacific region. Led by Paul Clark was a journalism group that supported the well-regarded Jefferson Fellowship program and Senior Editors' Conference. We had an information technology unit that dealt with the cultural, social and economic impact on development of technology from telephones to satellites. The transformative research of colleagues such as Godwin Chu, who headed the division, and Meheroo Jussawalla was featured in this group.

During my time at the Center, I was able to travel broadly throughout the region -- the Pacific Islands as well as East, Southeast and South Asia, and Oceania -- connecting with alumni groups, describing the current work of the Center, and attempting to further mutual understanding and mutual learning experiences.

EWC's Impact

On Career, Perspectives

Although I have not been formally attached to the Center since 1988, the effect of my association with the East-West Center has been profound. I've stayed in close contact with colleagues over several decades. (I don't give up friends easily.) The artist-in-

residence program was one of my favorites and we brought highly gifted and influential people to the Center like Mayumi Oda (now living on the Big Island); Jin Young-sun, the first woman to head an academic department in a Korean University (Korea University); Rupert Garcia, who began his artistic career as a political poster artist from Northern California; and Mohammed Yasin from India. Prominent journalists from East and West came as well, and I have remained in touch with many of them. For example, the *Christian Science Monitor* recently did a story on the work of the Osher Foundation [where I currently am president]. When the former editor who resides in the San Francisco Bay Area, Paul Van Slambrouck, called me, I said, “I bet you know John Hughes who preceded you as editor.” And, of course, he did. We spoke of John and his participation in one of our Senior Editors’ conferences. (John was also a former VOA director and is now on the communications faculty of Brigham Young University.)

My entire outlook on life has been greatly enhanced and expanded by coming to Hawai‘i and engaging both in formal and informal ways with the East-West Center. When my husband (Professor M.E. Bitterman) and I came to Hawai‘i in 1971, I was just finishing my dissertation at Bryn Mawr in European History; Jeff was coming as a guest professor for a year. (He had been to Hawai‘i in earlier years to teach in two different summer sessions.) Of course, one year came and went, and we stayed forever.

I have also tried to bridge my European and Asian/Pacific interests. Doing so is very important to me. When Japanese colleagues at the OECD asked me to participate in a program entitled TIDE 2000, I worked diligently to ensure that our international discussion of telecommunications developments for the year 2000 would reflect ever greater cooperation and understanding between and among nations East and West,

including Europe and Latin America.

I am about as bullish a person as you could find on the East-West Center -- its mission, its programs and the important linkages it provides. It is my fervent hope that over time we may have many more people in government and in the Congress who have had the benefit of some contact with Asia and the Pacific Islands, who understand how very important it is for us to know, understand and connect with the most populated, diverse and dynamic region of the world.

Aspects of my East-West Center experience have permeated my life and my values. I've tried to put others in touch with the Center whom I thought would benefit from their time there and who would add value to the Center's programs. One colleague, in particular, was the host of a radio program we started at KQED called "Pacific Time": Nguyen Qui Duc. Duc, who subsequently returned to his home country of Vietnam, had a wonderful stay at the Center which enhanced his journalistic abilities and reach.

On Region

The East-West Center has been many things to many people. In the Center's early days, *[President Everett]* Ets Kleinjans and his colleagues decided to forge a research and activity program to build upon what was already in place – an “international house” that allowed people from myriad backgrounds and cultures to “break bread” and eat rice together. In such a setting, people found that they could get on very well with their fellow students and participants – even when they came from cultures that had historic differences, if not long-standing animosities. In later years, the research program put in place was reorganized and refined during Victor Li's tenure – and now under Charles Morrison's leadership, we find additional changes to reflect more current priorities and

needs. While programs and activities have been altered over time, I think the overall mission of the Center to provide for meaningful cultural and technical interchange between the peoples of East and West has remained constant.

When people have an opportunity to come together and see how much we share, as opposed to how few things really divide us, the Center's value is placed into bold relief. My hope is that, over the years to come, the American people and people in the region will understand the importance of the Center's mission so that it won't have to worry going forward about resource deprivation. That said, we certainly need the Center to try to do every day a better job than it did the day before. The Center should always remain faithful to its priorities of bringing people together and focusing on how all of us – East and West – can work to make the world a safer, more peaceful, more congenial, healthier place for everyone.

Life Outside EWC

Career in Public TV, Foundations

You asked about my activities subsequent to heading the Institute of Culture and Communication at the Center. I spent several years doing consulting work with a focus on international communication, education and development in the Asia Pacific region and in Eastern Europe. Then, from 1993 to 2002, I served as president of KQED, one of the largest public broadcasting centers in the country headquartered in San Francisco. In 2002 I became the head of the James Irvine Foundation serving the people of California with philanthropic support for public policy issues, youth development and the arts. In 2004, I accepted the invitation of Bernard Osher, who had been one of KQED's greatest patrons, to direct the work of his foundation. The Bernard Osher Foundation is a

“spend down” foundation; it will not exist in perpetuity. Hence we are engaged in a deliberate process of “spending down” the funds Mr. Osher has given the Foundation in support of higher education and the arts across the nation. We have made several grants to the University of Hawai‘i system, I am pleased to report, for scholarships and lifelong learning institutes for seasoned adults.

I remain very involved with Hawai‘i, follow the progress of the Center rather closely, and do all that I can to extol its fine work. As I mentioned earlier, the Center has had a prominent influence on my life. You only need to come to our house in Honolulu and you will find evidence of that influence – which is both professional and personal. In nearly every room, you will see the artwork of colleagues from East-West Center days – from Mayumi Oda and Jin Young-sun to Mohammed Yasin and our host son, Redza Piyadasa.