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## EAST-WEST CENTER ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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# Ricky Kubota Interview Narrative

8-18-2009 interview 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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## **Ricky Kubota**

8-18-2009 interview in Honolulu, Hawaii

### **Personal Background**

My name is Ricky Kubota. I was born in 1957, raised here all my life in Hawai'i. I attended St. Louis High School, class of '74, and then the University of Hawai'i, where I received both the bachelor's and master's degrees in business administration.

I'm the oldest of three children. I have one brother and one sister. My parents are third-generation Japanese. My father's from Kauai, my mom is from Oahu. While at UH, I worked as a student help at the University system-wide budget office, and in 1980, when a state position opened up, I was hired in that same office as a program budget specialist, and in 1984, I migrated my way here to the East-West Center.

### **Life Before EWC**

#### ***UH Campus, '70s and Early '80s***

When I was going to school, there wasn't really much interaction with the East-West Center, on this side of the street. I mean, I was pretty much involved with UH, and again, as a student help and in my first four years as a State employee, I was basically just working with Bachman Hall. Bachman Hall is where the executives at the University sit, and my role was more to deal with the legislature, than deal with the East-West Center, and the UH system-wide budget office was responsible for the entire system.

So, I had to deal with not only the Manoa budget office, but also the community colleges, UH Hilo and West Oahu College. Like I said, I did recall seeing the East-West Center as a financial account on UH's books, but it was not something that was huge, or stuck out in my mind. During that time, there really was no, at least in my position at UH, there

really was no interaction with the East-West Center. Those were all taking place, either program-to-program, or I guess at the presidential level, but not really at the level I was sitting.

I did come here to eat lunch one time, because they had a cafeteria, in the Imin Center. I was kind of familiar with the facilities, and the grounds, but not much else in the '70s, and '80s.

Burns Hall was built after the other buildings on the East-West Center campus.

Basically, there was an agreement between the State of Hawai'i, and the federal government, that the federal government would give up Kennedy Theatre to UH, if the State of Hawai'i would put up a building for the East-West Center. So that was basically the tradeoff.

Because at one time, Kennedy Theatre, I think part of Moore Hall, and Edmondson Hall were all funded through federal funds, so instead of the Center taking over those buildings, which really weren't administrative buildings-type, the agreement became, OK, if you build the Center a building, with State funds, the federal government will release its claim to those other buildings, and you can have them. So, that's basically the tradeoff that got worked out. Yeah, so Burns Hall, built in the '70s, is the newest building on our campus. The rest of the buildings are all in the '60s.

## **Life at EWC**

### ***Joining EWC Staff***

My move to the Center is a bit of an interesting story. I received a phone call from Raleigh Awaya, who at that time was the head of the IT Department at the Center. I knew Raleigh back at UH when he was head of the administrative IT unit there. And Raleigh had a budget question to ask me, and since it was close to lunch time, I thought

that we'd walk and talk together on our way down to the gym, because we both exercised during lunch.

So, lo and behold, I came to Burns Hall, and I was directed to the vice president's office, where I met Wesley Park for the first time [*Vice President for Administration*]. With Raleigh in attendance Wesley started asking me questions, and I quickly realized that this is a job interview, and I was very unnerved, since you know, I walked in with my gym bag and everything, and I was very unprepared for being interviewed.

At that time, I knew some things about the Center, but not too much. I mean, I'd visited the facilities, I knew they had a financial account at the University of Hawai'i, but not really much else. Even so, I must have interviewed OK, because Wesley then asked me if I wanted to join the East-West Center as a staff member, and I asked if I could think things over, you know, because of a change in jobs. This was going to be a limited-term position, versus my state job, and any kind of change like this, you want to sleep on it, and Wesley politely told me "no," that he wanted my answer immediately.

Then he explained why and he said that, basically, his philosophy was that, your heart will lead you in the right direction. So, if I had to go home and think about changing careers, and moving to the Center, then maybe the fit wasn't the right fit. In other words, my heart was not telling me, yes I should come. I had to make my decision then and I accepted the job, to come to the East-West Center.

As far as management style, Wesley was no nonsense. You had an assignment, you finished it. It didn't matter how long it took you to finish it, if you had to stay late at night, or come in over the weekends, but you had a timetable to do it, and he wanted it done, and he expected it to get done.

I found that I had to really work hard, but also work smart, and Wesley was a teacher, and he had a whole bunch of little one-liners that he would say, "Do the small things correctly, and the big things will work themselves out." You know, all these little sayings that basically made a lot of sense, that you just had to keep at it. Keep at it.

### ***Li Presidency***

I worked again through Wesley and Myrna [*Nip*], and we had meetings with [*EWC President*] Victor [*Li*], a very scholarly man, very quiet man, and I thought, you know, he had led the Center quite well.

At that time, Wesley Park was vice president of Administration and Myrna was the administrator for Finance, and then at that time, I think Raleigh [*Awaya*] was administrator for IT, but also kind of like Wesley's right-hand man.

In my opinion, Raleigh was an excellent IT administrator. He made decisions, sometimes unpopular, but he tried to gather as much information and make the best decision for the Center. Raleigh also taught classes so he didn't only focus on technical stuff but also what the user required. Now, we all accept Microsoft products as almost standard business tools but Microsoft was only one of a number of computer vendors back then – and not even the largest. We could have gone with Apple or DEC (Digital Equipment Corporation) software platforms but somebody had to choose – and Raleigh selected Microsoft.

### ***Budget Analyst***

What does a budget analyst do? Again, the make-up of the office was we had a budget officer, which was Walter Quensell, and then an administrator for Finance, which was Myrna [*Nip*], so I reported to them. I worked as a budget analyst for about 10 years, and basically, our main job was, number one to submit a budget request, annually, to the

Department of State, so we had to prepare numbers, narratives, position counts, etc.

Once we did get an appropriation from the Department of State, it was then to allocate that budget to the various programs, and we would work with the president and all institute directors to work out a budget allocation for each unit. Then, the third part was, once the allocation was made -- at that time our computer system was such that all the budgets had to be inputted by account codes, and the system would prohibit you from exceeding the budget that was inputted.

## **Institutional Transitions**

### ***Budget Officer, RIF***

Right before the RIF [reduction-in-force], Walter decided to retire, and so I was fortunately appointed to replace him as budget officer. And as you said, '95 was the time of the RIF, which is probably the most depressing time I had at the Center.

What happened was in fiscal year '95 -- the federal fiscal year spans from October to September, so October '94 through September '95 -- the Center's budget at that time was \$24.5 million. On October 1, 1995, our new appropriation was \$11.75 million. So, over 50 percent cut in our budget.

It's really difficult to comprehend how to manage, when 50 percent of your revenue has just disappeared. But in a matter of weeks, we had to cut, basically, half of the Center's staff, in administration and throughout the whole building. And if I remember correctly, that amounted to about 120 positions, of which 90 were filled, so 90 warm bodies had to be let go in a matter of weeks, and that was really devastating to me personally, as well as professionally. A lot of people I knew and had close associations with just had to walk out the door.

And everybody else just had to pick up whatever -- I mean programs are still running, students are still here, and everybody else just had to wear multiple hats to keep the place running, and that's only half of the bad story. The other half was the intent -- the congressional intent, was basically at that time, that the Center would be phased out. Completely phased out. So in FY '97, from \$11.75 million, our budget then dropped to \$10 million, and the projections for the out years were \$7 million, \$4 million, and zero. So, not only, at least in the budget place where I worked, not only did we have to try and see how we're going to live with this smaller budget number, but also how to plan the next years, whether we could even still function as an independent business at a \$7-million level, or at a \$4-million level.

But fortunately, things turned around, and we never got to that really disastrous level. So, \$10 million was kind of like the low point, and from there, our fortunes seemed to have turned around and we started to get larger appropriations, annual appropriations from Congress.

Efforts were more on the researchers writing grant proposals, and bringing in grant money. At that time, the [EWC] Foundation was not really well-established, so that fundraising route was pretty much closed at the moment, so external fundraising was mainly from researchers getting more grants.

Unfortunately, grantors don't like to fund a lot of salaries, they like to fund program costs, so it was kind of like a dual-edged sword: You might get a grant, but then we had to put out money to hire staff and then fulfill the terms of the grant. After all, we had to think, could we accept the grant, because do we have the money to then put in our share to hire staff to actually carry out the program?

If people can sense that the organization is in trouble, then people question its viability, and then donors, they're not going to put big money on the table if they're questioning the future existence of the organization. It needed for the federal government to put money back into the Center, and luckily that happened.

Again, in 1995 we were getting \$24.5 million annually from Congress. In FY '09, this year, we got \$21 million -- this is the highest we've been since that time.

Back then we had 200, 300 positions and staff. The vast majority funded on the federal dollar, versus right now, where maybe only a little **over** 100 of our positions are funded by federal funds, and the rest are funded by external monies.

### ***Sumida Presidency***

I feel Kenji [*Sumida*] was the right man for the Center at this crucial period of time.

With his long history at UH, the Hawai'i Air National Guard, the UH Credit Union and other organizations, he was a known quantity. Our congressional delegation knew Kenji, the AFSCME (Center's union) leadership in Hawai'i knew him, etc. All this was important because any kind of RIF affects so many people and he had to explain the Center's actions to these audiences. I think he exuded the "common man"-type of feeling where anyone could knock on his door and "talk story."

### ***Director of Administration***

Charles Morrison was hired as president by the Board [*of Governors in 1998*], and he then asked me to serve as his director of Administration. It's a very challenging job, and again, I just try to make sure we have good people, and I get out of their way, and let them do their job.

I mean, the Center is very fortunate, that throughout all its administrative units, we have very professional people working here, with good attitudes, and they just do a marvelous

job. The administration's spectrum ranges from finance, to IT, to HR, to facilities. I don't have a broad knowledge of all the areas -- finance, of course, would be my strongest area, but you know, one day you come up to work and the lights don't go on, the electricity's off, or you have another problem like the water doesn't go on, or your IT system crashes. Every day, there's a different type of problem, and again, I'm just fortunate we have good people that can get on top of it.

Right now, as far as facilities we have Brent Watanabe, in IT we have Jonathan Chow, in HR we have Ralph Carvalho, and then in finance, besides myself, we have Clinton Nonaka. And altogether, the Office of Administration is about 55 full-time positions. And about half are paid with federal, appropriated funds, and half are non-appropriated money, most of them in the dorms, working in housing, and in the Imin Center, where they do generate their own revenues. So, that also has been kind of like a challenge, because that wasn't the case when I first started, where they were expected to raise revenues, to cover a lot of their expenses, but they have been doing a very good job in monitoring their expenses, and making sure the revenues they bring in, do cover the costs.

It then also frees up money for other areas of the Center. Now with the Foundation being more fully staffed, and getting itself together, hopefully the thrust going forward will be that we can raise significant endowment money through large gifts, and that would certainly help the Center in the future, because again, federal money is annual, and subject to change. But if we had an endowment, a large type of endowment, then that is more steady as far as money being available to the Center.

### *IT System*

The system we had, when I first came on board, basically, was custom-built, in-house, so it had all the nice things we liked, about automatically checking balances, and doing all the nice things that you like to do as an accountant. But, because it was built in-house, whenever there's a computer upgrade -- you go from Windows 3 to 4 or whatever the thing -- you need an IT person that knows the legacy system and can update it, because again, the system was all custom-built. So, somebody had to know the old code and then be able to bring it up to the new code, and make sure all the things still work the way that we wanted it to work.

When the RIF came, we had to re-look at everything, and basically, it was too expensive. We couldn't keep the number of IT people that were necessary to keep a legacy system running. And we had to make a decision to just buy an off-the-shelf, software package, which is what we currently run. And, it doesn't have all the bells and whistles, it doesn't have all the checks and balances that we want, but again, it's what we have to live with because the economics are driving it.

The IT staff that used to be on board, that maintained the legacy systems, those positions were cut and we haven't filled them again, and we don't have any plans to fill them again. So, we've moved along as technology has moved along.

It was a compromise, yeah, basically, and I'm sure we'll be doing that further and further, as we go along, whether it's with the telephone system or voice over IP, but there's a lot of things that are changing. How does an organization keep up with those technological changes, without ripping everything out that is already installed?

If you're talking about somebody with a \$50-billion organization, they can do great stuff. We don't have that kind of money, we don't have that kind of resources, so don't tell me I just need to press a button and all those magical things are going to appear. No, not yet. Again, we recently went through an IT study done by Dell, to look at our IT group to try and help us sort out these kinds of issues. What they found, basically, was our scale just didn't lend itself a whole lot to more efficiencies.

Because we're so small.

Maybe, you can cut a body, instead of having one body, you're going to have three-quarters of a body, is that going to save you a whole lot of money? No. We just don't have the volume and the scale that will allow us to develop the great kind of efficiencies, and basically, if we want to improve our systems, we're going to have to decide and dedicate some money to it. So, again, that's just been done, so we're going to have to think about how we want to approach the future.

### *Price Waterhouse Study*

When Charles took over as president, he wanted a study done about administration because that was an animal he just had no concept of. So, Price Waterhouse Coopers came in, they did their study, there were findings, and based on that it was my job to, as a newly hired director of Administration, to streamline the operations, and we did a decent job.

I looked at it as how can this report help us become more efficient and help the Center in the long-term. Like I said, there's still work to be done, but every day, we're attacking something else.

I mean we have a fish pond in the Japanese garden filled with koi, and one day, all the koi were dying. I think from a couple of hundred koi, we only have maybe like 20 left,

and so now we're asking, "What's the problem?" So yes, our problems range from dead koi, to fiscal things, so it's interesting.

### ***Management Philosophy***

I'm just grateful that I had the opportunity here, and again, I wasn't born a supervisor, a manager, so I learned a lot from the managers I had, and they were Myrna, Wesley and Kenji.

Again, my philosophy, which I learned from them, is you hire good people, and you get out of their way. They'll naturally do a good job, and the worst you can do as a boss is to micro-manage, and I try not to do that. My mantra is basically, it's your shop, you handle it. If there's a problem you don't think you can handle, come talk to me. But other than that, I trust your judgment.

I also think it empowers them, and it gives them the sense that they have my trust, and they have my backing, that they can make the decision and I won't jump on their case if the thing blows up in our face. It's just, OK, well, it's the best information we had, kind of thing, and so, the decision made was the best we could make in the circumstances. It turned out wrong, OK, I'll take the blame for that. But that's about it.

### ***EWC's Impact***

#### ***Best Memories***

I am just constantly amazed at the Center. It's not a relatively large institution, let's say, \$30 million revenues a year. And yet, I've seen U.S. presidents come through, I've seen prime ministers and other heads of countries come through the Center. We have royalty from Japan and Thailand, and other countries coming through the Center, and to me, that's just part of the amazing things, which, by deciding to work here, I got involved in.

Never would I have had that experience if my career was at the University of Hawai'i. So, my best memories are that it's been exciting here, and it's still going to be exciting working here. I mean, when you think about it, we've talked about the Pacific Century for a long time. The Middle East will always be in the news, but if you look at everything else -- China with its economic power and military influence; bombings in Jakarta, or Bali, or Mumbai; natural disasters that thousands of people die in Bangladesh, or Indonesia, or China; nuclear missiles in North Korea, or Pakistan, India -- that's all the Center's region, that's the things we study here, we collaborate with people in the region about, and I definitely wouldn't be as tuned in, as I am, to these kinds of things if I was working elsewhere.

But, because these are topics on everybody's plate some place in this building, or somewhere out in the region, it's things that really resonate with me. I go back and think about how my generation was taught. Basically, it was Western Civilization, it was Atlantic-centric, so the prism is based on that. There's this whole Asian-Pacific area, and Eastern studies which I didn't know a whole lot about, and there's a lot I still don't know about, and it's just amazing, and it leads me to question current news events. We hear so much -- is it coming from an American source? Is it the only source? Shouldn't we also look at different viewpoints on whatever event, or whatever happened?

So it really opened my eyes as far as how to view news, and how to look for different viewpoints on an event. Before I never used to do that because whatever I read in the paper, or saw on television, I thought that was gospel truth. Now it's facts are facts, but viewpoints are different. You just need to look at the whole picture. So, I think that's one of the things I take away from my work experience here at the East-West Center.

### *Programs for Journalists, Teachers*

One of the programs that I think exemplifies the East-West Center is our work with teachers, as well as our work with journalists. If we can just influence, or at least open these gatekeepers' eyes, they have the power to then do a multiplier effect to all their readers, or listeners, or whatever.

So, I think again, the Center with limited resources, is really efficient in trying to use these resources when it targets those groups, because again, we can't go out and reach everybody. That's just impossible. But, if we can reach journalists through their own professions, who are able to reach millions and millions of people, or by us reaching teachers, and they can reach their students, and their whole school enrollment. That multiplier effect really pushes the East-West Center mission forward.

That would be CTAPS, AsiaPacificEd, Jefferson Fellowships and other journalist programs. I just think, again, with our limited resources, that that's probably a very efficient way to get our mission out.

### *EWC Washington*

I think the D.C. office has done great, great work. Charles wanted to open a D.C. office, and I was kind of like a negative bell on that one. Sometimes people think that I'm just being an obstructionist because I do think that's my job, to point out all the potential problems we're going to face, or the things we're going to have to do extra, that we weren't asked to do before.

But the Washington office has been a great, great benefit to the Center. Started by Muthiah Alagappa, and now headed by Satu Limaye, it has given the Center visibility in D.C., and on the East Coast, to the point where now, Charles and various EWC staff

members can walk into different congressmen's offices, introduce themselves, and they would know something about the East-West Center.

What I think has been really beneficial are the periodic meetings up there, luncheons, where you have an issue, and you have let's say a government employee making one presentation, and you have an academic or somebody from the region making another presentation, and again, the thing about bringing differing views to the same issue, where at one time we thought one view was the absolute 100 percent correct view. Now, they're hearing something else from an academic, or from someone in the region, so it causes people to think, and that's always good.

So, yeah, the Washington office has been a great success, and I know Charles wants to expand this concept and maybe set up regional mini-East-West Centers throughout the region. Singapore, Hong Kong, and of course, I'm still -- (laughs) "What?!" (laughs) "How are we going to do this, pay-wise, rent-wise, health benefit-wise?" But if we're going to go down that path, I'll certainly try and assist as much as I can.

Yes, we have a model. Although again, it's [*Washington, D.C.*] still within the United States. I'm not sure about one in a foreign country, but again, if that's the direction the Center wants to take, then I'll certainly do my share. It's just that I'll be scratching my head a lot, and saying, how are we even going to start here? (laughs)

### ***On Career, Perspective***

Again, like I mentioned a little bit earlier, the Center has made me want to broaden my gathering of information before I make decisions and that kind of thing, and again, it's reinforced my need to be humble and to respect all cultures.

Again, I see all the different nationalities of people coming through the Center, like students, and thinking about their circumstances, that they're far from home -- I'm not the

adventuresome type, but they apparently are -- and they left home with minimal financial support, or resources, and they've come here to study and learn, in a whole new culture, away from family and friends. So that's opened my eyes, too. To talk to some of the students at the functions, it's very enriching.

I've actually even mentored a couple of the students. It's interesting to hear their stories, and they're interested in hearing mine, and I think the sharing of experiences is wonderful. That was through the alumni, they try to match professionals with the students, and the students' own career goals.

I've learned a lot from my co-workers, and I hope they learned something from me. Basically, again, your work here is also a microcosm of how you live your life. You try to be respectful of everybody. For me, I try to be humble. There's no sense in being arrogant or anything like that. There are different ways to get your point across. And if you can do it in a way that the other person isn't offended, well, more power to you. And so, I think I've learned a lot from my co-workers, and again, I hope they learned something from me, too, that we all can take to our other lives outside the Center.

### ***EWC Mission***

I think the mission has not changed. We're still following the mission as far as bringing people together, creating a better understanding between the peoples of East and West. Again, I think the collaborative nature of all our projects is what sets us apart from other organizations.

When you hear President Obama, or President Bush before him, they talk about interaction, that it's not like Americans lecturing the rest of the world, and that everybody is equal and has equally valued viewpoints. The Center has always practiced that, and so we were always ahead of the curve.

I think we're doing it efficiently, going back to the example of our focus on teachers and journalists. There's that multiplier effect. The dollars we spend can be multiplied through their own networks, and then spread the Center's message. So, I think we're doing a good job.

I still think every day, like recently with a new group of students coming to the Center, it's kind of like the seasonal cycle, and birth. Here's a new group coming in, and they're going to learn about the East-West Center, they're going to learn about their own lives and how to take the Center's message back home, to wherever they're going to go, and hopefully spread that thinking to whoever they meet in their circle of friends and acquaintances.

### *Personal Legacy*

This year I'll make 25 years at the Center, so I guess it is time to think about legacy. I just want people, if they remember me, as somebody who did the best job that he could, while still being courteous and respectful of everyone. That's all.

I mean, like I said, when I first came on board, Wesley told me, "You'll be gone in five years, don't worry about it." I said, "OK." I was young then, so it didn't matter to me, but 25 years I've been here. So, yeah, I just want people to hopefully recognize that I did the best job that I could.