



EAST-WEST CENTER
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EAST-WEST CENTER ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Vijayan Munusamy Interview Narrative

10-14-2005 interview in Honolulu, Hawaii

Please cite as: Vijayan Munusamy, interview by Carolyn Eguchi, October 14, 2005, interview narrative, East-West Center Oral History Project Collection, East-West Center, 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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Vijayayan Munusamy
10-14-05 interview in Honolulu, Hawaii

Personal Background

My name is Vijayan Munusamy but I'm known more as Vijay. My hometown is Bagan Serai, Perak -- in Malaysia. Bagan Serai is a very small town, four hours drive from Kuala Lumpur, one hour drive from Penang.

I was born there, educated until secondary grade, everything was there. I'm the eldest child, I have one brother and two sisters, all of them are working now. I'm married. We have three kids -- one son, two daughters -- last daughter was born in Hawaii two years ago.

I was working in Malaysia before coming here. I graduated in mechanical engineering in '92, and since then I was working in many different areas; in construction, in telecommunication, and also doing my own business for some time.

I saw an opportunity to pursue education through an advertisement in a Malaysian newspaper for a Japan Focused MBA (JEMBA). I knew East-West Center by going through the application of that program. I was interested because one, for the program, and second one is the intercultural living at the East-West Center. So that's how I ended up here in the year 2000.

Life at EWC

The 2000s

When I first came in the year 2000, I was a Student Affiliate, and in 2001 I was accepted as a Degree Fellow and since then a Degree Fellow. And during this four years plus, I

have taken many roles, including leading the East-West Center Participants' Association and involved in alumni activities.

The timing was right, in 2002, the alumni conference was held in Malaysia, so I spent some time there helping with the conference. And I have also served in many committees at the East-West Center: for example, the student insurance committee, and the recent Centerwide strategic planning committee. I've been gaining a lot of experience and knowing a lot of people at the East-West Center through these activities.

Best Memories/East-West Fest

All the memories are very good. But the first one is: I led a group of people to organize East-West Fest in year 2002. Though the East-West Fest was organized on annual basis since the Center was set up, in year 2002 we organized a "Global Peace Circle" and that was the first time we did that.

And what is interesting is that all the students gathered and we made 1,000 ti leaf leis, I mean we weaved - we ironed the ti leaf, and then we weaved 1,000 leis -- we never planned for that but at the end, we wanted to have a greater impact. So we gave the leis to everyone, everyone who came to the event, and there were more than 1,000 people. So, it was so nice because at that time there were a lot of tensions in the world, and also there were issues with nationalism and patriotism at the Winter Olympics. So we thought we could contribute something because students at the East-West Center are from different countries, so it makes a perfect place for us to do that.

I took on the task of organizing the East-West Fest to showcase the cultural diversity of the United States and the Asia Pacific region. I conceived and initiated a "Global Peace Circle" as part of this cultural event in response to the 68 wars that were happening in

various parts of the world and growing tension between the United States and Muslim nations. I strongly felt that multicultural students in Hawai'i could convey the message of global togetherness and the possibility of world peace through this festival in a symbolic way.

So the first one was in 2002, and then we replicated it in 2004. So I hope, maybe in the future the same thing could be done.

Alumni Conference 2002

The other memory was, of course, the alumni conference in 2002. It was the first alumni conference I attended and I met a lot of people there. And being in Malaysia -- had the advantage of helping people who came to the conference -- that was memorable.

The suggestion was given by one of the alumni members who was a student here before. And she said, "Why don't we give garland?" We don't call it leis; we call it garland or something like that. But that idea suited well because in Hawaii leis are very popular, and we thought, OK, we should do it. My family had a small orchard of jasmine flowers -- it is four hours drive from my place. So one of my family members had to come down in the morning, just to deliver the leis and she went back. But that was very good thing -- to the conference participants.

Tsunami Relief Effort, 2004

For the [2004 Asian] tsunami, earthquake, we did the fundraising; the Hurricane Katrina, we also did fundraising. So I think that's one advantage of being at the East-West Center, where you have a lot of international students who have the understanding that we need to live together. I don't think you can get this experience anywhere else -- in any other educational organization.

Impact of 9/11

One of the things that came up is due to 9/11 incident. I think the visa restrictions are much tougher. I personally did not have any impact, but I know some of my friends who had a lot of challenges being here because of visa restrictions, and I would like to share, two incidents.

The first incident is there was one student who was granted a travel fellowship for a conference; it's a prestigious conference in China. And the student is from Bangladesh, and the student has family here. The student's visa is expired, that means as long as the student is here in Hawaii it's not a problem because the visa is extended during the duration of study, but once the student leaves the student needs to get a fresh visa to come back.

The student was afraid to go to China because, you don't know what would happen. If the visa process takes time, then the family here will be affected. There is cost involved, where student is going to stay in China if visa takes time. At the end the student gave up the grant, he didn't go to this conference. I felt very bad because one of the reason for students being here is to gain educational experience, and going to a prestigious conference is one of the best things that student can do. So, that is one.

The second problem was, there was one student -- from Bangladesh also -- his father was sick, and he need to go back. So he had the same problem, once he goes back, he need to get new visa to come back. So he delayed the trip, he had some things to do here, he delayed the trip, but he arranged everything, he arranged mother in-law from Bangladesh to come to take care of the family as well. The day the mother-in-law left Bangladesh, his father died.

So he was in a situation where he could not go because the mother-in-law is coming, he needs to help her settle here. And, that was really affected him and I felt, that is something that I think we could have probably seek some alternatives.

I think at the East-West Center we have a lot of alumni, a lot of people -- who can understand the culture. And probably there are ways that, we can help these kinds of situations.

I think the students can't do much, I think there's something that the Center probably can do, and one of the example what Center can do probably is maybe through contacts.

Let's say the China case. Probably the Center could have contact somebody that they know in China and asked their help or guidance. I know there is a procedure to follow but at least explain that this is the circumstance, recommendation letter whatever. There is a student, he need to come back and please help. I know that's all the Center can do; I mean, the Center cannot do more than that. But at least there's channel that the student can go in.

That was not done because there's no formal channel to do that.

EWC's Impact

On Perspectives

I think, when we say how a student -- affect on -- from the Center, I think it goes beyond the student. Like in my case, my family is here. So they have special relationship with the East-West Center community, and I think that's very important.

It's very difficult for a person who has family, and the family is not here. So for me, personally, there are lots of memories for my family, but at the same time, we also have established community relationship with the East-West Center. We basically broaden

our friendship. We would never have a chance to get to know somebody, for example, let's say from Bangladesh or Nepal or China or U.S. It gives a broader perspective. So I think the influence is not by one individual, but by a group of people who are here.

The Mission

When I first came, my perception is more directed to intercultural dialogue. Intercultural community. And was much less emphasis on research because I was not inclined in that area. So when I came here -- I still experience intercultural experience, but I think what would be amazing probably is to having more cross-cultural dialogue. Students do interact with others and all that, but I think, we could do that more.

And I understand that the Center had, at one time had cultural institute, or communication institute. And that was stopped when there was issue with the funds. That probably an area that probably East-West Center can look again, revisit, because, there's a lot of things going on in the world, and most of the things, I believe, it's because of misunderstanding the cultural context.

I majored cross-cultural communication, cross-cultural management in my Ph.D., so I can see the value that cross-cultural work can bring to the Asia Pacific region. So maybe that's something that we can do in the future.

[Since I've been here] the wording [of the mission] might have changed, but I think the spirit is still the same.

One of the benchmarks probably is the increase of students. I think we are going in the right direction, we have many more students. When I first came, I was the batch of maybe 40 students. But now I think the recent was 150 [students] so there was a drastic increase in that, and I'm looking from student perspective because that's where I'm from.

We have expanded Hale Manoa. We have renovated a lot of things.

Being a family person, I think one of the area that East-West Center can look, probably, providing facilities for families because in a way we are living off-campus, and there are a lot of families off-campus, and they do contribute positive contributions to the East-West Center mission, but I think by being together, you know, nearby, at the Hale Manoa dorm, or having special arrangement might help.

Living off-campus, it's difficult, you know, because one is the cost for the family, but I think it's important to have families all together. Like the place that I'm staying-- they're off-campus -- I think, at least 50 percent of the apartment units are rented by East-West Center students.

Future Priorities

I think one of the priority, should be on recruiting quality candidates. I'm not sure what is the number of candidate that applying for the program, but I think it should be made competitive, and one of the way to make it competitive is probably to seek external funding for the scholarship.

Because, frankly, the East-West Center scholarship now for Degree Fellow students is not competitive even with UH fellowship. I think the current students are paid 200 dollars per month, accommodation is free, but out of that 200 – over 100 is taken for federal tax and all that, so it's not competitive, so for a student, they will go for competitive scholarships. And, of course, you know, we are getting students but we are also losing a lot of qualified potential students as well.

Ties That Last

Alumni Network

I think East-West Center students should see East-West Center scholarship beyond the financial value. For me, the value of the scholarship itself is not big but the value of the experience that I'm getting -- is very big. Friendship with people, friendship with students, cross-culture dialogues -- I will not get these anywhere else. I think that's the biggest thing that East-West Center is doing.

And you know, when I went back to Malaysia -- I met alumni, I met Poh, chair of the EWCA, and Dato' Salleh, the chapter president for Malaysia. We exchanged dialogue and being the fact that meeting students studying in East-West Center itself brings memory back to them, they're happy to see me. I don't think many alumni organizations will have that bonding, so that is great.