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## EAST-WEST CENTER ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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# Gordon Ring Interview Narrative

5-25-2005 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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## **Gordon Ring**

7-25-2005 interview in Honolulu, Hawaii

### **Personal Background**

I was born in New Britain, Connecticut, moved at a very early age to Stamford, New York, in the Catskills. And then moved from there to Jamestown, New York, when I was about five years old, starting school, and spent my school years in Jamestown, which I consider my home.

And then, after completing high school, I went on to a small men's liberal arts college, Hamilton College, in upstate New York, in Clinton. I didn't do real well my freshman year, so I took what I call my sophomore year in Asia and went off to spend a year in Korea with my dad, who was working with USOM or AID at that point.

That was my first exposure to Asia and where I really became very interested in learning more about the region. So when I came back to Hamilton I focused on Asian History and got my degree there in 1963, and got two scholarship offers. One was to this brand new place called the East-West Center and the other was to Columbia University.

### **Life at EWC**

#### ***The Mid-'60s***

It was very easy for me to decide that I'd prefer Hawai'i to New York City, so I accepted the East-West Center scholarship and came here in the summer of 1963 and was an East-West Center student for a couple of years, which included a field study for about nine months in Taipei, Taiwan -- learning the Chinese language, Mandarin.

When I came back, I completed my Center award, but hadn't received my master's degree yet. I was studying for a master's in Chinese History. In order to survive initially -- I

became the dishwasher in the East-West Center cafeteria, which was quite a surprise to some of our Asian colleagues, who didn't expect to see me wearing a dirty apron every day in the cafeteria.

Then I went on to do some teaching with the University of Hawai'i night school, and after that went to Punahou School and taught 9th and 10th grade history for a couple of years. I was competing against a very famous entertainer, Al Harrington, who was teaching history in the room next to mine, and sometimes my students would ask me how come I didn't teach like Al Harrington, which was a real ego-buster for me.

### *Joining Staff, 1969*

That's when I felt I needed to find another vocation, so I came up to the East-West Center one spring day and asked my good buddy, Benji Bennington, if she knew of any jobs available at the Center, and she said she thought there might be one in Public Affairs. So I went to talk to Bob Hewett, who was the director at that point. And Bob said, "Well, I don't think you know anything about journalism, but I assume you do know something about the East-West Center, so let's give it a try."

In those days there was no EEO Coordinator or Selection Committee. It was just the decision of "the boss" if he wanted to hire you, and so we gave it a try. I was initially writing press releases and taking photographs, and my responsibilities included taking care of the dark room, where I'd go down most every day and spend an hour or two developing pictures.

### *Assistant to Kleinjans*

That was in 1969 -- and then in 1971, the president of the Center, Everett Kleinjans, asked me to become his assistant. And so for the next 10 years I worked as the assistant

to the president in the President's Office, and had quite a variety of interesting assignments during that time. Then I continued to work as the assistant for Lee-Jay Cho for about a year, when he was the acting president. And then when Victor Li came on board as the new permanent president, I continued working with him for about six or eight months -- or actually it was more like a year.

*Alumni Officer, 1983-93, 1999-*

I moved into the alumni officer position in 1983 and continued until 1993 when I left the Center to take a job in Florida with the Florida Institute of Technology. I worked there as an assistant vice president for six years. And then when the alumni officer position opened again here at the Center in 1999, I applied because my wife, Milly, and I had always planned to come back to Hawai'i at some point, and what better way to do it than to come back to a job at the East-West Center?

I was a little nervous about it because they say you can never go back -- and I wasn't sure that it would work out well, but it certainly has worked out very well for me. I've been delighted to be back here now for almost six years, and I expect to continue working here for several more years.

*Hale Manoa/ Hale Kuahine, '60s*

The Center had begun in 1960 when funds were appropriated from Congress, and initially, there were no buildings really for the Center. There were some temporary buildings on campus that were being used. The students all were living off-campus at various locations: a Buddhist dormitory and some hotels in Waikiki and so on. But the permanent buildings were being constructed during that period of time and when I arrived in the summer of '63, actually the dormitories were just being completed.

Initially the Hale Manoa dorm was designated a "High Rise" and the Hale Kuahine dorm was called "Low Rise," based on their general height levels. And we called them that throughout the time that we were at the Center, even though eventually they were given the names Hale Manoa and Hale Kuahine.

So all the buildings were brand new and just opening up. Lincoln Hall, which was built as a guest facility, was in fact used as a library and office space during the '60s. So when you went into the library you could literally find books in the bathtubs, for example. Of course the two dorms were used as dorms, but they were rather strictly organized by gender, so that Hale Kuahine was strictly for females and Hale Manoa was largely all for males, although there was, I believe, part of one floor -- the third floor -- which was designated for females. But they were not allowed to mix.

### *Jefferson Hall, '60s*

Jefferson Hall was really the focal point in the Center for everything that went on, and we had our mailboxes there. There was a beautiful lounge, which was open to the outside to a certain degree, with huge windows. That's what is now the *[Keoni]* auditorium

The cafeteria was in the basement. Eventually, where I worked as a dishwasher. And, of course, initially all of the students ate there. There really weren't any other cafeterias on the university campus, so our cafeteria had a certain monopoly for some years. Not only did all the East-West Center folks eat there, but also a lot of the University of Hawai'i folks. So the cafeteria did very well during the '60s.

We were required to eat there. We got meal tickets, which were only good and valid in the cafeteria, so that assured that they got good attendance there. Even though now, when alumni come back and are grumbling and griping about the fact that Jefferson Hall

has been changed into a conference center and there is no more cafeteria, naturally, when we were there we all griped about the terrible food, and why did we have to get meal tickets, it wasn't fair, and why they were restricting our freedom. But actually it was a wonderful time because we really enjoyed the opportunities to meet so many other people -- both in the lounge, when we were reading papers or our mail, and down in the cafeteria.

I can recall spending many, many hours, sometimes going down for dinner at around 5 o'clock and leaving the cafeteria at maybe about 8 o'clock as we moved around and talked with different groups of people during the dinner.

So it was a wonderful time for us, and the Japanese Garden was also built just about that time. There was a donation from about 22 or 23 Japanese businessmen to pay for the cost of the Japanese Garden. Today, it still looks almost identical to the way it looked when it was first built in the '60s.

### ***Student Body, Mid-'60s***

There were more students generally than we have now -- sometimes as many as five or six hundred in the course of a year. The ratio was still roughly the same as it is now: that is about two students from Asia and the Pacific for every one student from the United States. And that was a purposeful ratio that was decided early on as creating a good mix of students from all the different areas of Asia as well as the United States.

The national or ethnic make-up of the student body was similar to what we have now.

The State Department legally defined the area that we would work with and that we could use appropriated funds for. And it was the same area that we have now: South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia, the Pacific and the United States.

We always, if we had external funds from other sources -- we were able to bring in people from other areas as well. And there was a time where we were bringing in Iranian students. Up until the time -- I guess '79 -- when there was the major problem that we had with Iran.

### ***Vietnam War Years***

Many of us had good friends from Vietnam and we were all very, very concerned with what was happening there and would hear stories about families that were in Vietnam and what was happening to them. So I think it had quite an impact on all of us.

And just as in other areas of the United States, as the war went on, there were folks who were opposed to it and felt it was a big mistake. In fact, a few of our students got very involved in political protests: John Witeck helped to found a group called SDS -- Students for a Democratic Society -- and, I recall, led some protests .

And then, also, Noel Kent was very much opposed to the war, and, among other things, burned an American flag, which was considered quite a major incident at the time. And I recall later that Noel was applying for his field study -- basically we all were offered field studies back in those days and went off to Asia if we were Americans, or if you were from Asia you went to the U.S. mainland -- and Noel's request for field study was turned down and I recall that he, of course, said it was solely because of his political leanings and the Center folks were saying that it was some other rationale that he didn't get it. I don't recall exactly what happened, but that was a big incident at the time, also.

### ***Benji Bennington***

During the time that I was a student from '63 to '65, Benji was working at the Center in the Housing Office. Believe it or not, Benji was never a grantee. She never actually had

a participant award. Everybody naturally assumed she did because everybody knows Benji and everybody associates her with the East-West Center. But, in fact, she had an employment relationship initially. And she was always around and always very active and always getting involved with parties and things. It seemed like just about everybody knew Benji and so I got to know her at that time. Then, when I started working here in '69, Benji was also working in the same office area, so we continued our relationship from that time forward.

## **Institutional Transitions**

### *Separation from UH*

The relationship between the Center and the University of Hawai'i was something of a difficult situation for a number of years because we were getting virtually all our funding from annual appropriations from Congress and we were viewed by Congress and the U.S. government as a federal-related organization and not a state organization.

So every year, when we went to Congress to have hearings about our budget, there would be criticism from some of the Congress people, including -- especially -- John Rooney from Brooklyn, who was always ready to throw some barbs at us and at one point said that he felt that, "Why should the Congress be funding a WPA project for the University of Hawai'i?" So there were people in Washington who felt that the money that was being allocated from the federal government was just going to a state university, and that didn't seem appropriate. So we had to deal with that issue for many years. And then another related issue was that we were reporting to the University of Hawai'i Board of Regents, which was the ultimate governing body for the Center. And when it came to policies and procedures that the Center had to follow, President Kleinjans devoted

something to what he called the "Kleinjans Law," which was when you're working under two different systems -- in our case, the state system and the federal system -- you get the short end of both.

And there was a lot of truth to that. When it came to policies and so on, if there were conflicting policies between the federal government and the University of Hawai'i and the state, usually whoever made the decision selected the worst policy -- haha -- the most restrictive policy and so on.

I should say there was one important body that was designed specifically to represent the federal/national interest in the Center, and that was the National Review Board, which was set up in the '60s and continued until 1975. And that included some very distinguished individuals, including Claire Boothe Luce, for example. They would meet a few times each year, and their role was to ensure that the national interest in the Center was appropriately handled and recognized.

But during the early '70s, when Dr. Kleinjans was the president, he began working with Harlan Cleveland -- who then was the president of the University of Hawai'i -- to work out a new accommodation -- a new arrangement for the Center -- where the Center would be independent of the University of Hawai'i, and therefore be able to reflect the national interest more clearly and more effectively. So, in 1974 and then into 1975, a huge amount of attention was put to incorporating the East-West Center as an independent entity.

It was a very exciting time. I was still working for Kleinjans as his assistant, and so a number of us got very much involved in all the different details that had to be worked out

to shift the Center from being under the umbrella of the university to being an independent organization.

There was a fellow from the State Department, Bill Cunningham, who spent a number of months working with us to help us from the State Department angle. One of our lawyers, Gerry Sumida, was very much involved in all the legal work and drafting the charters and other legal documents for the incorporation. And Gerry Sumida has continued to be interested in international activities, even though he is no longer linked with the Center. He's currently involved with a number of organizations here in Hawai'i that are concerned with Asia and the Pacific.

And, a couple of incidents that I recall -- one was we had a student magazine that was produced at that time called *Impulse*, which was reinvigorated and reinstated in the last couple of years. At that time in the '70s it got into "muck-raking" and they loved to find problems and scandals and administrative mistakes and so on. Within the Center. And to let everybody know what was the problem.

And so when the incorporation started, that was the big story for the *Impulse* magazine, and at one point, Mike Anderson -- who has subsequently become a distinguished alumnus of the Center and is now the counselor for the American Embassy in New Delhi, India -- at that time Mike was one of the key reporters for *Impulse*. He and one of his colleagues interviewed President Kleinjans, and President Kleinjans said a few things which he probably should have clarified were "off the record," but didn't.

And so, they ended up putting in *Impulse* some comments about the president of the University of Hawai'i and the Board of Regents of the University of Hawai'i which weren't very flattering.

So that created a real problem with the progress of incorporation. Another thing that happened was one of the chairs of the Education Committee in the [State] House decided early on that he was not going to support the bill to incorporate the Center. And so, one of our staff members, Fusae Uyemura, was his next-door neighbor, and so Fusae went down to see him and convinced him that, "Let's give this a chance," and so it got back on the docket as a bill to be considered.

And then probably the most exciting thing was that many of the East-West Center students were convinced that this was a plot on the part of Kleinjans and the Center to do away with the student program. Kleinjans, for a number of years, had been shifting some of the resources that went to students to research. And initially, when he started there was about 75 percent of our funding went toward the student program and only 25 percent went towards research. Kleinjans was trying to bring it more into balance so there'd be about 50 percent for students and 50 percent for research. And, of course, some of the students, as well as faculty and others at the UH were opposed to that -- thought it was a big mistake.

So the students felt that this was a plot on the part of Kleinjans and some of the others to basically do away with the student program. So, they were going down, lobbying at the State Legislature, going from office to office. And then some of us, who were staff members who were in favor of it, were also going down to the State Legislature and lobbying folks to vote for the bill. And we'd often run into each other in the hallways and we generally maintained a gentlemanly or ladylike relationship with each other, but occasionally things got a little heated.

It [*the bill*] was finally passed, and as of July 1st, 1975, the Center was established as an independent organization, no longer under the control of the University of Hawai'i. And, for those students who were concerned, we never did do away with the student program. And, in fact, although it's had some tough years with the budget cuts, the student program now is back up to about 400 students a year, which I think is the most students that we've had here since maybe around 1970 or so. So it's been quite a change. But when I look back at my own experiences at the Center, I think the two most exciting and interesting ones that had the biggest impact on my life were when I was here as a student from '63 to '65, and then during those couple of years when we were incorporating in the mid-'70s.

## **Ties That Last**

### ***Alumni Network***

I think that those of us who were directly involved with this Center always felt a very distinct identity for the Center [*from the UH*]. Even today, 40 some years later, when you go out into the field and meet with East-West Center alumni, they always maintain the identity with the Center very clearly and profoundly. In fact, often times if you ask what they remember the most, rather than the University of Hawai'i and the degree they got there, they remember the time and experiences they had at the East-West Center. I guess one of the issues or challenges is that most traditional alumni organizations that are linked with universities and colleges focus primarily on maybe two areas. One is nostalgia, just "the good old days" and recalling all the fun that somebody had when they were there on campus as a student, and secondly fundraising.

The real goal, often, for an alumni organization is to encourage alumni to give something back to their alma mater. I think the East-West Center arrangement with its alumni is more complicated than that. As far as I'm concerned, our primary objective is not to raise money, although we do raise money, and money is important to us. But our primary objective is to get more of our alumni involved in the Center after they leave the Center, so that our network of 50,000 alumni really expands the outreach of the Center throughout the region, and it's not just the 21 acres with the buildings that are located here in Honolulu, but in fact the East-West Center is everywhere you go in Asia. Because wherever you go, you meet East-West Center alumni. And if you happen to be a fellow alum, our alumni know that by getting in touch with another alum somewhere, you're going to have a bit of extra help and support and guidance and advice that you wouldn't get otherwise. And so it's a very marvelous network of colleagues that we've been working to establish.

I think my major challenge is to take the potential of this 50,000-numbered group and expand on the potential and make it a reality, so that our network continues to grow and prosper. And at this point, for example, out of the 50,000, we have about 12,000 that we call active alumni, which is defined generally as alumni who are in touch with us, who communicate with us, who we send our newsletters out to and so on.

But we really want to work to double or even triple the number of active alumni, so at some point, hopefully not too far away, we have 20,000 or 30,000 active alumni rather than just 12,000.

So that's probably our basic objective. And we do it in a number of ways. One of the things we're doing now is building programs with students so that the students become

aware of the Alumni Association while they're still here as students and realize that the Alumni Association can support them when they leave and that the network can be helpful to them, so that when they leave the Center they become active alums. And this also helps with the age issues because, now, many of our alumni leaders are from the '60s, like myself, and we really need to invigorate the Association with some younger folks.

The other thing we're doing is building more chapters. We now have 40 chapters around the world. And we're also building special interest chapters so that, in addition to geographical chapters, we have chapters that are linked with special groups or special interests, like the media alumni and the APLP alumni and the ASDP alumni. And we continue to hope to expand on that.

So we've got chapters, we've got our network, we've got our links with students. And then we have our online community which alumni can join. And the biggest advantage of the online community is you have access to an alumni directory. The same records that are in our database here at the Center are available in the online directory, so that anybody anywhere who has access to the Internet can go in there, as long as they're an alum, and there's no charge. They're able to look up their friends or colleagues or find people in other areas that maybe they're going to be traveling to and need to have a friend there to help them get oriented or whatever.

Generally we've learned that it's a big mistake to write off any of our participants as far as their interest in getting involved with our Alumni Association and getting involved -- or keeping involved with the Center, because we've had many short-term folks that were only involved in a one- or two-week conference who end up being leaders, who end up

running chapters, who end up being on our Alumni Board, and so on. So if you look at the percentage, yes, I think you would find the largest percentage of active alumni comes from the student side and the education side. There are still significant numbers of others who get involved.

## **EWC's Impact**

### ***The Mission***

We did a survey about a year ago, of our alumni. And it was a very positive response with regard to the mission of the Center and the impact it's had. Many, many alumni, even those who didn't come as students, who may have come for short-term periods, sincerely feel that the Center had a major impact on their lives and careers. And I think part of it is that we have such a lofty mission that many, many people support that mission, and whether they were here for two or three years or maybe just two or three weeks, they really are committed to the mission of the Center and therefore feel that the Center's doing good work. So I think that's the case.

Over the years, the fact that we've now had 50,000 alumni involved with the Center and that they are now spread out all over the region, what happens every once in a while is you get East-West Center alumni on two different sides of an issue. Some years ago, when Indonesia was becoming independent, and Singapore was becoming independent, there was quite a political flap over what was going to happen to those two areas. Didin Sastrapradja, who is one of our Distinguished Alumni, was involved in the discussions. And he noted that one of the reasons they were able to help resolve the situation was the fact that there were two East-West Center alumni, one on each side of the issue, and they were able to work something out.

I think things like this happen rather frequently. We don't always hear about them, of course. But, I think, in a practical way the Center is kind of lived out in the lives of many of our alumni.

It's a real advantage that the Center is in Hawai'i because it's kind of a halfway point, not only geographically but culturally, to be in Hawai'i, for many of our Asian students. I know they find coming to Hawai'i as an easy transition to them, coming from their homes in Asia. For example, if they were immediately going to New York or Washington or something, those areas are so different from the areas they're coming from that the orientation and the transition can sometimes be very difficult. I think people just feel at home here. They feel at ease here. It's easier to adjust. Plus it has such a pleasant climate and such a pretty environment that it makes it attractive for people to come here.

### ***Impact in Asia, Pacific***

I think that the Center has basically a very positive and good reputation in Asia and the Pacific and that many people feel that the Center is a neutral location that isn't just spouting off the party line of whoever happens to be in power in the United States, but it's a place where you can go to freely express your opinions and hear from others who also are freely expressing their opinions.

Now, there always has been and always will be a certain tension there, a certain balance because we are funded largely by the federal government. And we do have a link with the Department of State. And we do know that one of the roles of the Department of State is to put the positive factors related to the United States out to others in the world. But I think we've been able, at the Center, to maintain an appropriate separation from that

and a reputation that we really are truly independent, as far as views of the world situation and so on.

I've seen just tremendous development, almost unbelievable development, in so many countries. And I guess I remember especially Korea, when I went there in 1959, which, of course, wasn't all that long after the Korean War, and for that matter World War II, and to see the very depressing level of poverty for so many people. And then coming back to Seoul, Korea, I guess it was maybe 25, 30 years later, and seeing this huge, bustling metropolis, with high-rise buildings and cars and now, of course, with everybody having cellular phones.

It's just hard to comprehend the huge changes that have occurred, and that, thank goodness, generally the level of living standards has increased for, many, many people as well. So it's not just a small minority, but in many of the countries, many people are now doing better than they were. And I think another amazing statistic is that there are as many members of the middle class in India today as there are total population in the United States.

That's really hard to believe -- I think, from the reputation that India has had, for example, over the years of being a poor country. And then, of course, China, with its unbelievable economic drive going up 8 percent or 9 percent every year. Clearly the United States is not going to be the number one superpower for a huge amount of time into the future. And I don't have any problem with that. I think that's great. I mean, I think we ought to have more of a balance around the world of significant powers that can deal with each other, hopefully in peaceful ways, of course.

*[Editor's note: Ring was asked if he thought the East-West Center has had a role in improving opportunities for women in societies in Asia.]*

Well, I hope we have. I think we have. I certainly recall, when I was here in the '60s, that although I don't remember exactly what the percentage was, we had a goodly number of female students as grantees.

And I believe that's always been the case and has continued into the present day. And now there's even more, I think, awareness of this than there was then. We have special programs at the Center now, like "Changing Faces," which specifically is focused on women's issues and brings women here to discuss issues that are relevant to them throughout the region. So we hopefully have done at least a small amount of programs and activities that help in that area.

### ***Professional Impact***

I expect that, if I hadn't had those two offers for scholarships back in '63, I probably would have gone to Columbia University, and studied Asian history more and perhaps gotten my Ph.D. and probably gotten into the academic world as a professor or teacher or something. When I stepped off the plane here for the first time and saw the blue skies and the blue ocean and the fresh breeze, I knew I'd come to the right place. There were never any second thoughts at all.

I've been an exceedingly lucky, fortunate person to have had the distinct honor and pleasure to spend the majority of my life here in Hawai'i and at the East-West Center.

I expect to continue working for several more years. I do often think of how nice it would be to be retired and not have to get up in the morning and go to work. But then I

also think that if I do have to go to work, where else could I possibly find such a wonderful job?

I mean, it's a wonderful place to work. We've got a great president. I've got a great boss in External Affairs. You've got a great bunch of colleagues. The students are still wonderful. And, in fact, when I went to the completion ceremony a few weeks ago and heard them talking about all their enthusiasm and excitement, it reminded me of exactly the way we all felt 40 years ago when we were here as students. So, the basic atmosphere and the spirit of the Center still are strong and continues.

My wife, Milly, is very much involved with the Center. She came out to Hawai'i in the late '70s. And one of her first jobs was working in the Awards Office here at the Center. And then she became a secretary and worked in a couple of the old Institutes, the Communication Institute and Cultural Learning Institute.

We met here playing tennis. I used to play tennis at lunchtime. Nobody'd probably believe that now. My secretary used to arrange for a partner. And so one luncheon I didn't have my usual partner, and my secretary arranged for Milly to be my partner. And we both kind of decided maybe we'd be partners in more ways than just tennis. So that evolved very, very nicely for us.