

KOKUA HAWAII ORAL HISTORY PROJECT INTERVIEW WITH
Claire Shimabukuro



Claire Shimabukuro
Photo courtesy of the Shimabukuro family

Claire Shimabukuro was among the 32 people arrested in Kalama Valley on Oahu Island, protesting the eviction of Native Hawaiians, farmers and their supporters on May 11, 1971—an event historians have identified as the start of the Hawaiian Renaissance. It was also a time when Shimabukuro was busy, serving as a member of the steering committee of Kokua Hawaii, the group that organized the eviction resistance and eventually several other eviction resistances in Hawaii. As a member of Kokua Hawaii in the early 1970s, Shimabukuro became a volunteer driver for the federally-funded Honolulu Community Action Program, bringing van loads of eggs, milk and bread at discounted prices to residents living in low-income housing.

Shimabukuro later became a major force in the growth of the Meals On Wheels Program on Oahu, serving as its executive director, coordinating the daily delivery of meals to thousands of Hawaii people in critical need of essential services. The interview took place on October 16, 2016, and November 7, 2016 at her residence in Kaimuki.

GK: Good afternoon, Claire. When and where were you born?

CS: I was born in 1952 in Honolulu.

GK: What did your parents do for a living around that time?

CS: In the early 1950s, my father Thomas Yoshiaki was a manager for the Hawaii Housing Authority, the agency that administered state public housing projects. He was the housing manager for the projects, such as Mayor Wright Housing, Kalihi Valley Housing, Halawa Housing, and Manana Housing in Pearl City. My mother was a social worker for the Department of Social Services. Both had college degrees.

GK: Your parents' level of education was rare for that time. How did that happen?

CS: My mother was the daughter of an Okinawan immigrant whose parents had been

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plantation owners in Okinawa. They sent him to Hawaii in 1905 to keep him from being drafted in the Russo-Japanese War. He was a plantation luna (supervisor) and a subcontractor. So, he had money, relatively speaking, but made a lot less than the other lunas. There was still a lot of racism because he was the only one that wasn't haole. But he believed in providing an education for all of his children, including his daughters. So, my mom went to school here, and then she went to Mills College later to do graduate work. Mills College in Northern California was regarded as the Radcliffe of the West. . . She did studies on the cannabis culture and how it was affecting the social fabric of the United States.

GK: What about your father?

CS: My dad came from a very poor family, fatherless and destitute. His father had abandoned them.

GK: How many children were in the family?

CS: There were three—his older sister who left school to work, my father who was the second oldest became the housekeeper, and a younger brother who suffered from heart disease all his life and ended up dying because of malnutrition at the age of 12. They had a very destitute existence. When my grandfather left our family, my grandmother taught herself how to sew and worked as a seamstress in Paia and Kahului. She ended up saving enough to relocate the family from Maui to Honolulu, where there was a better opportunity for business and employment. The family lived on Piikoi Street near Beretania. She also worked as a hotel housekeeper.

GK: So what happened?

CS: They were newly arrived in Honolulu and had no social support system. They fell through the cracks. I found a letter from my father saying that they almost starved to death because my grandmother was taken ill with pneumonia and he and his sister were alone, and they were going to elementary school. And she kept saying, "I'll struggle to stay alive, but you guys have to promise to stay in school." And he said they were crying, and they were trying to do their studies, and the electricity was turned off, and the water was turned off, because she couldn't pay the bills. And he said they survived only through the kindness of the grocery store people who gave them food. . .

GK: Mm-hmm.

CS: They could have been dead but they survived. Needless to say, my grandmother's a very strong person. . . She went through some pretty deep hardships.

GK: So what happened?

CS: President Franklin Roosevelt started his New Deal policies and a lot of new services

were provided, such as the WPA. Roosevelt was the hero of that era.

GK: So there was a turnaround?

CS: There was a lot of optimism during that time. But my father and his friends will tell you that Franklin D. Roosevelt was a great president, but not without the masses of people pushing him to the left. When my father talks about war, he'll say . . . there are two things. Number one is he'll say, "Okay, World War II is a just war because it stopped the rise of fascism. . . . But as a social worker, I would think that all conflicts could be settled without war." Many of his generation's defining moment was the civil war in Spain.

GK: What happened to your father?

CS: He went to McKinley High School, and he went to California to work and ended up going to UCLA (University of California at Los Angeles). While attending college, he had to work and live in the kitchen of the place that he washed dishes.

GK: It was rather bold of your father to go to California and to work his way through college?

CS: Well, here's what happened. His father, who had left the family when my father was three, ran away and joined the Salvation Army and ended up in Los Angeles. So as my father was getting to the age when he would graduate from high school, his father wrote to my father and said, "Hi, I want you to come and live with me because then I'll send you to college."

So, my father went. But when he got there, he realized that his father wanted him to work and support him. So, he ended up doing both, supporting his father and himself, and putting himself through school. It was a real disappointment.

GK: How did that go?

CS: The Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in December 1941. He left during his last semester in college and was incarcerated in an internment camp at Heart Mountain, Wyoming.

GK: Wow.

CS: It's unclear as to whether he volunteered or was drafted, but he served in the U.S. military and went to Europe with the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. He had education, a college education. The military put him in Italy. And he did a lot of the accounting functions as a supply clerk.

GK: How was it in the internment camp for him?

CS: His friend from the internment camp tells me that they had a going-away dinner, and

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it was like the Last Supper. They had no money, so they only had a little candle. And they ate, I don't know, pork and beans out of a can. And this was like their farewell to him like they wouldn't see him again. . . My father told me that on the boat going over, there were a lot of local boys that were frightened because it was war. So, he and a couple of other people played music all the way and sang. . . My father would say that World War II, unlike Korea, Vietnam, and the Mid-East conflicts, World War II was a just war. The others are wars of U.S. imperialism.

GK: Did he talk about his own personal experiences during World War II?

CS: When he talked about war or World War II, he won't go into detail about some of the grimmer parts. He comes from a generation like your dad and perhaps a cultural and racial background in which you don't trumpet your stuff. You're very quiet. . . So, when he said, "You know, guys died," I mean, it was an understatement because, generally, the Japanese Americans were slaughtered. . . He wouldn't even talk about his childhood.

GK: What happened after the war?

CS: When he came back to Hawaii, he worked for the Hawaii Housing Authority.

GK: Where did you grow up?

CS: When my parents were first married, they lived in an apartment above a garage in Kaimuki. Then we moved to Halawa Housing because my father, as a government employee and leftist, felt that you cannot manage a public housing project if you don't know what the conditions are like. So, we grew up in public housing.

GK: Wasn't that where Bette Midler once lived?

CS: Yes, I remember the Midler family. Her brother Danny was developmentally disabled. I don't remember Bette. She was a lot older than me. Her mom was a proud woman. I think for some people, Hawaii is a place that galvanizes your resolve. We also lived for part of the year in Waianae where we were on a watermelon farm.

GK: Mm-hmm.

CS: It was also part of this romantic notion of growing your own food and all this stuff. So, my dad and a friend of his from the HGEA (Hawaii Government Employees Union) had a watermelon farm in Lualualei Homestead Road.

GK: Mm-hmm.

CS: I've started kindergarten in Waianae, but the commute for my father was too far. For the most part, I was raised in Halawa Housing and went to Halawa Elementary, then Aiea Elementary, Aiea Intermediate and then went to St. Andrew's Priory in downtown

Honolulu for the last four years. It was then an Episcopal women's school, an English-style system of education founded by Queen Emma.

GK: Why did they decide to send you to St. Andrew's Priory?

CS: My mother didn't tell me until much later. It was because I had an English and Social Studies teacher who hated me. . . I remember students were supposed to do book reports. So, we had to stand up and say what book we chose. And, I stood up and said, "Animal Farm." And in front of the entire class, she said, "Don't you think that's a little too juvenile? Don't you think that's a little too young for this class?" And I was 13 and just puzzled as to why she said that because my uncle Dave, who was a brilliant engineer and a communist and all this stuff, we had discussions about George Orwell's allegory of the failure of communism in the Soviet Union as told through his experiences. I mean, that's the kind of round table discussion we would have at home in Halawa Housing. (Chuckles)

GK: She didn't understand what Animal Farm was about?

CS: She apparently had no clue. So, dumbfounded, I said, "This is an allegory. . ." and remember, I'm 13, and she's the authority figure, ". . . about how communism has failed in the Soviet Union—the arguments being that because some people feel that Orwell had a utopian view of communism and the real world works differently. But others feel that absolute power corrupts absolutely. And so, this is a story about. . . how that works or not, that people can become their opposite like this."

GK: What was her reaction?

CS: Her face just dropped. She became really angry. After I began attending college, my mother told me that the teacher had recommended that I be put into the remedially mentally retarded section in high school. So, my mother decided that rather than fight, she'd look for private schools. She nixed Punahou because she said that is the school of the haole missionary. She didn't want to send me to Catholic schools, because they were religious. She looked at the curricula and she figured that the Priory was the best.

GK: How'd it turn out?

CS: Here's the deal. It was an excellent education. A couple of the teachers had been acolytes of Saul Alinsky, unbeknownst to the administration. The quality of the education was excellent. I hate to say this because I'm gonna sound like a horrible snob, but I didn't like some of my classmates because they were entitled spoiled kids to whom the world was the next Gucci bag or something.

GK: It sounds like you were coming from a different background?

CS: I was going to demonstrations while I was in high school. My parents would give me notes to the Priory, "Please excuse Claire, today. She's going to a demonstration against

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the Vietnam War.” And so, I would take the note to the school and I would leave. . . . I don’t know if I told you this but my uncle on my mother’s side was blacklisted during the McCarthy era. My mother’s brother-in-law had grown up in Texas and was a member of the Communist Party USA. He was a brilliant engineer. He and my aunty took part in the civil rights movement and went to Mexico to meet revolutionary artist Diego Rivera. They also were good friends with John and Marion Kelly. My uncle was fired from his job at IBM because of his political beliefs. My mother was involved as a social worker with A.Q. McElrath and Jack Hall (later to become ILWU leaders). So I kind of grew up in the movement. Kalama Valley was just a progression of that.

GK: So your family supported you.

CS: They were all involved. I was involved with Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the Hawaii Resistance, as a supporter of the Black Panther Party, when I was still in high school and so were my cousins. My cousin Leota went to Cuba and supported Cuban leader Fidel Castro. She was in Cuba at the same time as some of the Kokua Kalama members. It was far more of an international movement than meets the eye. I remember the draft was happening. My cousin Craig was doing anti-war activities and draft resistance counseling. He was also at Wounded Knee and the Chicago Democratic Convention of 1968. My cousin Scott — his brother who had enlisted in the Marines, of all things — ended up helping to found Vietnam Veterans Against the War. So my family culture was the movement.

GK: How was Kokua Hawaii different than these other groups?

CS: The thing about Kalama Valley that was transformative for me was that a lot of people from different kinds of movements, including the church, surfers, students, communities, Hawaiians, and other local people came out to join a rebellion. It was the first time I felt like I had my own part of the movement, not just my family’s tradition. Kokua Hawaii was an organization that had been in the works for a long time. We had a steering committee. We had different spokespeople for different appropriate situations. We had a collective leadership, and most importantly, we had heart.

GK: Who were your first contacts?

CS: People I’ve known for years were the first to be arrested in 1970s in Kalama Valley. They were an extension of the anti-war movement in Hawaii. The residents as a whole were not involved then.

GK: So there was a shift in focus?

CS: Yes. Suddenly, we were doing land and housing work. Larry Kamakawiwoole was a close friend of John Witeck and the Rev. Wally Fukunaga who was the reverend at the Off Center Coffeehouse near the University of Hawaii. Larry brought in a number of people,

including Soli Niheu and Edwina Akaka.

GK: How old were you when you were arrested in Kalama Valley?

CS: I turned 19 a few days before the arrest—Kokua Hawaii leader Linton Park and I shared the same birthday in April and we had a celebration in the valley.

GK: How did you reconcile your activities with your educational goals?

CS: I was gonna go to Yale or Bryn Mawr or those kinda places. My mother sat me down and she said, “What’s your intention? The school thinks you should be a doctor.”

I said, “I think I wanna protest the war and organize, do some organizing with poor communities now.”

And she said, “Well then you better not go to those schools for this reason: “If you can’t stand and say your principles in the place that you live, then you can’t do that work.” So, you should probably stay here. So, I went to University of Hawaii. Most of the time, I was just standing at the university’s Hemenway Hall in front of a table, collecting money for your—fill in the blank—Puerto Rican relief fund, anti-war things, we had draft counseling things, and ultimately, Kalama Valley.

GK: How did you get from the university to Kalama Valley?

CS: The university was focused on the anti-war movement. I wanted to do more work in the local community. A family friend, an unsung hero, was John Kelly. John was an old red as well from way back. I learned a lot about how you organize from him. He was doing Save Our Surf work and was looking at the impact of sewage itself on surfing sites like Sandy Beach outside Kalama Valley.

GK: Can you describe Kalama Valley as you remember it?

CS: I remember Ehukai place, the road in the valley, and how dry it was. It was almost barren-looking, not a lot of green. By the time Kokua Hawaii occupied the valley, there were five or six houses that were occupied. On the right hand side was Moose Lui’s home and the collection of local hippie types who lived with him. Down the road on the left side, George Santos had his house and pens. It was a working pig farm. Further down on the left, Manny Boteilho had a pig farm. And Ah Ching Po’s house and pig farm. The Richards family was further down at the end of the road. Black Richards, his father and sister Anne, were scrap metal dealers. Black was also a mechanic.

GK: How did this situation develop?

CS: The pig farmers kept getting pushed out of the valleys on Oahu because of the developments, moving further east, from Kahala, Aina Haina, Niu, and Kuliouou. Kalama

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Valley was the last valley. It was a metaphor for what happens to the poor, including many Native Hawaiians. Those who fed the people and did an honest agrarian living were getting pushed further and further and further until there was nowhere else to go.

GK: How was Moose?

CS: Moose was kinda like one of those counter-culture type guys. You know Moose Lui was larger than life. Literally, he was above six feet tall and he had wide girth. He used to always go around with sunglasses. He had long white salt and pepper hair and used to wear a bandana around his head. The young people who were around him were guys that were out of the late 60s. Hawaii is on a slow boat culturally. So, like the Haight-Ashbury culture came to Hawaii probably in the early seventies or something. So, these guys used to hang around in Moose's house and smoke and hung out with their music. You know Bambutu, Danny and Red—those guys looked like the Furry Freak brothers or they looked like Cheech and Chong. So Moose kinda hung out with them. . . He was a guy who just wanted to live his life. You know, he could be said to be an older Hawaii hippie. I mean, culturally speaking, he was Hawaiian in the way that many people were, but there was not a consciousness of, you know, we're Hawaiians.

GK: Mm-hmm.

CS: He had been a heavy equipment operator for Local 3.

GK: You ever talk with them?

CS: I talked to him and his wife Mrs. Lui, a Native Hawaiian woman. She was very grounded. She talked about when they grew up, they grew up with kupuna that spoke Hawaiian. They were told they couldn't speak Hawaiian in school. So she was one of the people in the valley who talked about the decimation of the Hawaiian culture and of the language. She told the story in a matter-of-fact way, "When I was young I used to speak Hawaiian." In fact, my mother, who is Okinawan and grew up in Kohala, spoke Hawaiian.

GK: What do you remember of Black Richards' father?

CS: He wasn't a very large man. He was slender. He was always wearing overalls. You know, the mechanics overalls. He was a scrap metal dealer. He had a crew cut and a mustache. He didn't say very much. He's very hard working.

Black was everybody's idea of an iconic hero, and he looked it. You know, Black had a mustache, and he was a Hawaiian guy. He had long hair in a ponytail and wore a bandana tied around his head. He just had a very awesome scary look, and he talked about how people had to fight back. He was buoyed by the movement of people. And his sister Anne was very emotional every time she spoke. . . Black and Anne were in their 20s at the time.

GK: What did she speak about?

CS: She would call all the women “sister.” She would speak from the heart, and she would cry because she was gonna lose her house, and everybody would cry too. She would pour her heart out. They were both arrested with us.

GK: Why did they step forward?

CS: They represented the generation that was coming into their own. Black was working class. He was like, from Hawaii, you know, from the ground, a scrap metal dealer. You know, he was not from the educated, “Let’s inherit the counterculture protest kind of thing.”

GK: Do you think Anne and Black’s willingness to be arrested was an indication that the nature of the Hawaii protest movement was changing? How many working-class people had been arrested protesting an eviction in recent history?

CS: Yes. Heretofore, the Hawaii progressive movement was characterized by the local labor movement of 1930s -1950s; and the civil disobedience movement was characterized by the anti-war movement involving many white university students. Kalama Valley revolutionized the movement in Hawaii.

GK: While you were a member of Kokua Hawaii, what were you doing to fight the eviction?

CS: We organized geopolitical tours. When people would drive into the valley, they would see different people staged in different places with signs like, “George Santos and his X number of pigs, where will they go?” Different people would be holding signs. There was a photograph of Edwina and Kalani and I sitting on a car. And it said, “Where will the people go?” And people would drive by and they’d see all of us standing in front of different houses or along the road with educational signs. And so, I think we did that many times as a way to build consciousness. Then we would do pickets in front of Bishop Estate offices and trustee homes. We did it strategically. I remember one time, Nelson Ho and Aaron Kanai and I were picketing Bishop Estate trustee Hung Wo Ching’s house, because we were Asian. Asians were picketing the house of the Asian trustee. At the same time, a bunch of Hawaiians were at the house of trustee Richard Lyman who was Hawaiian.

GK: What were some of the activities you were involved in as a Kokua Hawaii organizer after the Kalama Valley arrest?

CS: I was a member of the steering committee and wrote articles for Kokua Hawaii’s *Huli* newspaper. Once a week and sometimes more, I helped evicted pig farmer George Santos on his farm, which was relocated to upper Pearl City. I also worked as a volunteer with the Kai-Kalihi Co-op. As a volunteer, I delivered milk and eggs to all the housing projects, along with our *Huli* newspaper.

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GK: How did you become the executive director for Meals On Wheels?

CS: For about 18 years, my regular day job was working in management in the air freight forwarding industry. At one point, I was the executive director of the Hawaii People's Fund and a community organizer with Unite Here!, Local 5. I was actually offered the executive director job with Hawaii Meals on Wheels.

GK: What lessons did you learn as a result of the Kalama Valley protest?

CS: Despite mistakes, it sparked a local movement. Residents of different neighborhoods in danger of eviction started coming to us. If we had been much more strategic in a protracted struggle, we would have done the research, we would have targeted things. But after Kalama Valley, that was almost not necessary because people were literally calling us—people from Ota Camp, Census Tract 57, Niumalu. Halawa Housing, some people from Kona.

GK: How would you describe it?

CS: I think it was like a magnet. You know Che Guevara used to say, create one, two, three, many Vietnams. Because the whole idea of Vietnam was people fighting against colonialism. And if you create many of them, then you bring down the colonialists. I remember spending a lot of time in high school classes speaking that this movement was not particularly about Hawaiians. . . It was an issue of class and to help the poor fight back.

GK: Which high school classes did you go to?

CS: Some were at Roosevelt at Setsu Okubo's class, and at classes by Dennis Hokama, who taught at Aiea High School.

GK: What would you normally say?

CS: We'd start by telling the story of Kalama Valley. John Kelly put together a slide show. Some of us would use it. Kelly was showing the impact on water, the impact on surf sites, the impact on housing.

GK: How did your parents and relatives react in terms of you being arrested in Kalama Valley?

CS: It was easy for me. . . I remember they came and brought some potluck and birthday cake in Kalama Valley, because Linton Park, a protest organizer, and I were born on the same day. My mother came every day to the courthouse with my family and brought lunch for us every day.

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