

KOKUA HAWAII ORAL HISTORY PROJECT INTERVIEW WITH
Terrilee Kekoolani



Terrilee Kekoolani
Photo by Ed Greevy

Terrilee Kekoolani was a student at the University of Hawaii-Manoa in the early 1970s and developed a new perspective about Hawaiian history, as she became associated with Kokua Hawaii members and others in the anti-war movement. She has participated and helped to organize a number of protests, one of which led to a 1972 sit-in at the university's Bachman Hall. As a university student, she was on the Kokua Hawaii committee during the sit-in that negotiated with the UH administration to save the Ethnic Studies Program. Kekoolani was working as an organizer for the American Friends Service Committee, when interviewed on May 16, 2017, at Coffee Talk restaurant in Kaimuki.

GK: Where you born?

TK: I was born in Oakland, California and initially raised in Berkeley.

GK: What were your parents doing at the time?

TK: My father George was going to architectural school at the University of California-Berkeley campus. He eventually worked in Honolulu. There are several condominiums in the Ala Wai and Ala Moana area and private homes that he designed. While we were in California, my mother Edith was a police officer during the day. At night, she was an entertainer, a hula dancer. She danced at the Tonga Room in San Francisco.

GK: When did your family return to Hawaii?

TK: Well, when my father finished school, my parents decided to come back home to Hawaii. His plan was to start his business in architecture. It was significant because he was one of the few Native Hawaiian architects in Hawaii.

GK: Wow. I didn't know of any Hawaiian architects back then.

TK: He was an artist too. He took up the profession of being a designer architect. That was his forte.

GK: Were your parents involved in activist politics?

TK: They had absolutely nothing to do with it. In fact when I started to become more vocal about my beliefs, we had our differences. Eventually, they saw that I was very determined to pursue an activist lifestyle and they began to support me.

GK: Okay, how long did that take?

TK: It took a little while. When I went to Kahoolawe to protest the military bombing of the island in the late 1970s, for example, and I got arrested, my mom came down to pick me up at the Ala Wai Harbor and my dad took me to court.

GK: Was she a police officer then?

TK: No. When we returned to Hawaii, she became a travel agent, and a very well-known travel agent. She managed Island Holidays in Waikiki.

GK: That's quite a switch in jobs.

TK: My father supported my mother's decision to be a travel agent. He himself wanted to travel. Both of my parents influenced my siblings and myself, saying in order to understand the world, you have to go out and see the world and meet people and go to new places.

GK: Did your activism begin at the University of Hawaii?

TK: No. It began in high school. I started organizing against the Vietnam War.

GK: Why is that?

TK: Because it was a very bad war. I was at an all-girls Catholic school, Sacred Hearts Academy. The nuns were against the war, so at the very least there was support for my activism in that way. When I started organizing, there was a little group of students who went to other schools and met other people our age that were against the war as well.

GK: What grade were you in high school?

TK: I was a junior in 1968.

GK: So how did that evolve?

TK: Because of my activities opposing the war, I began to study militarism in Hawaii. Former Gov. Neil Abercrombie was a teacher at the University of Hawaii at the time, and he and others also were against the war. I would actually go off the Sacred Hearts campus and go to the University of Hawaii in my Sacred Hearts uniform, and I would listen to

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some of these guys like Abercrombie, other UH faculty members, and students opposed to the war. It helped me shape my perspective.

GK: Abercrombie was an American Studies teacher?

TK: Yeah. He had a whole look about him, black gloves, black shirt, black pants, black shoes, and then a little beret and a ponytail. I used to go and check out his speeches on the campus. Anyway, those kinds of things interested me.

GK: Did you bring any friends with you?

TK: I tried. (Laughter) There was a small group of us opposed to the Vietnam War at my school and other private schools.

GK: Okay. So what happened after that?

TK: Well, because I had an interest in going to join the protest at the University of Hawaii-Manoa, I started meeting people on the campus, and so it was a natural transition for me to be at the university. I started meeting other activists on the campus and then we started having discussions about forming a group and classes to talk about the issues impacting our different ethnicities. So, that was kind of the seed.

GK: Who were some of these activist students at the time?

TK: There was an African American student, Mutu, then Native Hawaiian Pete Thompson, and eventually I met Kehau Lee.

GK: What happened once you graduated from high school?

TK: I went to the university. The person I was influenced the most by was Marion Kelly. She was teaching anthropology. I became her assistant.

GK: That's kind of an honor?

TK: Yes. She was working at the Bishop Museum in anthropology. She hired me and so I was at the Bishop Museum doing work and going back and forth between the museum and the university.

GK: How were you influenced by Marion?

TK: Auntie Marion stressed going out to the community and meeting community leaders in the midst of struggle. As an anthropologist, she stressed research, doing your homework and getting your facts straight. But most importantly, she said, "Don't be afraid to speak out."

GK: How did you meet members of Kokua Hawaii?

TK: Well, when Kokua Hawaii expanded its organization beyond Kalama Valley, a bridge developed between Kokua Hawaii activists and people on campus. We invited them to come into the classes and speak about their issues and present their point of view. The whole idea was, again, to bring the issues from the community onto the campus.

GK: What kind of issues were presented by Kokua Hawaii members and how was that different than the usual talks in classes?

TK: It was getting into the conditions of our people—poverty, evictions.

GK: How did you feel about being selected to sit at the negotiating table with Kokua Hawaii, looking at Acting Chancellor Richard Takasaki and Dean David Contois at the other end?

TK: It was important to me. For me personally, it was a very good learning experience. It was important for students to have a voice. There were no books about this kind of stuff.

GK: What did you learn?

TK: The whole idea of community activists coming to the campus, bringing their perspective and experience, and us listening to them created new connections among the students, faculty and them. It was like opening the door. It brought us a new understanding—that community people were important to listen to, and their voices must be incorporated in educational institutions. We encouraged students to get off campus and get into the community.

GK: I know an important part of education in Kokua Hawaii included visits to Kahuna Lapaau Sammy Lono's home in Haiku and talks about Hawaiian culture. How did your visit with him affect your understanding of Hawaiian culture and history?

TK: It was Joy Ahn who introduced me to Kahuna Sammy Lono. He had a lot of aloha for her. He really introduced me to Hawaiian spiritualism and culture. At one point, I remember Uncle Lono occupied the state's Kualoa Park to focus on its religious significance and access. His whole thing was challenging the state and going to religious places that Native Hawaiians had a right to be. . . . Some of us were actually going down to be with him. It was at the very beginning of the walks around the island and the Lono banner for makahiki. . . . He was there when they launched the *Hokulea*. In the beginning, people would make fun of him. He was wearing a pareo made of white sheets. He was bringing the culture back into our thinking. His actions helped to shape what was beginning to shape the Hawaiian Renaissance.

GK: Did you ever visit or have talks with Randy Kalahiki? How would you describe his style of leadership?

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TK: Randy Kalahiki was a community leader. He's the one who taught us about the names of the valleys in Windward Oahu like Waiahole and Waikane and introduced us to the concept of the ahupuaa system and histories of the people who once occupied the valleys.

GK: What are some of the ingredients for a successful protest?

TK: It's not spontaneous. You have to do a lot of planning with other people. Having contact of the community leaders and with the students was very, very important. The community leaders gave us ideas and the confidence to prepare ourselves to take on issues that were very controversial during that time.

GK: I know quite a number of communities were fighting evictions at the time and asking for help. What were some of the qualities and elements required to be a community organizer?

TK: You have to have discipline. Regular meetings are really important. You want to have principled debate where everyone has a chance to have their say before taking action. At the end of the day, you've got to do something.

GK: I understand that Protect Kahoolawe Ohana leaders sought your advice, when several years later, they were thinking of how to stop the military bombing of Kahoolawe?

TK: Of course, during that time, when Ethnic Studies was first established and institutionalized on the campus, there was a whole renaissance of culture on the campus—speaking Hawaiian, doing Hawaiian things in Hawaiian classes was really very popular. Even the students who were Japanese were challenged to learn their culture and Japanese American history. You had cultural things going on, as well as political. Sometimes they clashed. Sometimes it all worked out. That's part of the whole process.

I was asked by Protect Kahoolawe Ohana members George Helm and Walter Ritte to meet with them. They asked me about organizing. "How do you do it? What do we need to do?" They were really, really thinking about how to develop their own strategy and move forward.

Walter, at the time, didn't want to just bring in a San Francisco-style movement. It had to be something different—our own consciousness about being Hawaiian.

GK: I know you joined the Ohana and was arrested with them on one of the landings on Kahoolawe and actually went to court to challenge the arrest?

TK: The protest involved quite a transformation. Even when we went into court, we felt presenting ourselves in what we wore was very important. There were some young people dressing in traditional style. It was a very important turning point for me—not just being an activist, but really challenging oneself to be Hawaiian.

