

In Loving Memory of Melvin “Mel” Masuda

Before our dad’s passing, he took the time to document his life experiences, preserving the cherished memories and stories he shared with us throughout the years. These written memories provide us with a lasting connection to him as we navigate life without his physical presence. We will miss him dearly.

Melvin “Mel” Masuda was the embodiment of using his law degree with the “aloha spirit” – helping others before thinking of himself: In the Hawaiian Renaissance of the 1970s, Mel volunteered to help George Helm form “Hui Alaloa” and the “Protect Kaho‘olawe ‘Ohana.” When George disappeared forever off Kaho‘olawe, through many tears, Mel wrote the album liner notes for George’s posthumous vinyl album: “A True Hawaiian.” Then, for 25 years, Mel was a Professor of Law at Hawaii Pacific University, not only teaching juniors, seniors, and MBA students in-person and on-line but also advising them whenever they had questions about what career path to take.

Mel came from humble origins: His dad, Tatsuo, was an immigrant from Japan who came to the Territory of Hawaii in 1920, just a few years before the U.S. anti-Japanese and all-other-Asians Exclusion Act was passed. Tatsuo was age 13 and had been promised an education – he got that education in the school of hard knocks when, soon after he arrived in Lahaina, he was sent to the sugar cane fields to work. A few years later, when one of his friends disappeared from the work gang, he asked where his friend was, and was told: “Oh, da guy got a job as a dining room waiter at the Wailuku Sugar Plantation hotel.” So, Tatsuo went to his friend, and asked the friend to “shimpai” [request] the next job opening for him – and Tatsuo got that next job.

Mel’s mom, Setsuyo Ono, was born and raised in McGerrow Camp on the HC&S plantation. She went through eighth grade at Puunene School and then was apprenticed as a seamstress. Later, while Dad Tatsuo worked as a waiter, she got a job as a pineapple trimmer at Maui Pine. Mel was born in a sugar-cane-field clinic during World War II. The middle of three sons – older brother Richard and younger brother Roy – Mel attended Wailuku Elementary School. Those were “the good old days” – He was put in first grade because kindergarten was full. While at Wailuku Elementary, Mel discovered the Wailuku Public Library on High Street, and, through his reading books, the whole wide world opened up to him: He read about Hawaiian legends like Maui lasso-ing the sun and about the American Revolution. But a future on Maui Island was not meant to be: Due to foreign competition, the plantation hotel went out of business, and Dad Tatsuo – leaving the family behind for a year because he couldn’t afford to move them – came to Waikiki, where he found a job as a dining room waiter at the old Halekulani Hotel, with the bungalows. The rest of the family came the next year, and Mom Setsuyo got a pineapple trimmer job at Dole Cannery.

Mel attended Ali‘iolani Elementary School, Stevenson Middle School, and then Roosevelt High School, where he was Editor-in-Chief of the school newspaper. That news writing experience led to three summers and a year-off-from-college working as a news reporter – the third one of color in the newsroom – with the “Honolulu Advertiser.” Mel took Advanced Placement courses at the University of Hawaii at Manoa and was accepted at both Stanford and

Princeton universities. His parents wanted him to go to Stanford “because it’s closer,” but, like a typical hard-headed (and wrong-headed) teenager, Mel said – in those days when local kids went away to college and didn’t come home until the next summer – “Well, if I’m gonna go away to college, I’m REALLY gonna go away.” So, he left Hawaii for the first time— to attend college at Princeton – 5,000 miles away: He was intrigued that he would finally be seeing where the Revolutionary War Battle of Princeton – that he had read (“red”) about at Wailuku Public Library – took place. When he left Hawaii, Mel was thinking about going to medical school so that he “could help people,” but he couldn’t keep up with all the prep-school classmates: He flunked his first physics exam, and dreams of a pre-med major came crashing down. “So, I took the line of least resistance,” Mel recalled. “Since I got good grades in poli sci, I decided to go to law school.” Mel was lucky enough to be accepted at Yale Law School, which has always been ranked #1 in the annual U.S. News national rankings of U.S. law schools. He earned his law degree, Juris Doctor (J.D.), there and also served as an editor of the *Yale Law Journal*. He then studied for and passed the Hawaii Bar exam, and next served as a Law Clerk for Chief Justice William S. Richardson.

In those “bad ol’ days,” however, there was a military draft and the Vietnam War was in high gear, funneling thousands of young U.S. men to that area. Mel chose the option of joining the 411th Engineers Battalion at Fort DeRussy as an Army Reservist – meaning that he had to have six months of active duty in Army basic training, followed by five-and-a-half years of required monthly Army drills. Mel did his six months of Army basic training at Fort Ord, California (which has since been decommissioned and is now the site of California State University at Monterey Bay). With a recommendation from the Chief Justice, Mel was then selected, in a national competition, as the first-ever White House Fellow from Hawaii and the second of Asian American ancestry nationally. The White House Fellows Program brings professionals to D.C. to serve for a year as administrative assistants to top Cabinet officials. Mel was Aide to the Secretary of the Treasury, banker David Kennedy from Chicago. Then, Mel was invited to study at Harvard Kennedy School, where he earned a master’s degree in public administration (M.P.A.), making him one of the few people in the world who have earned degrees from Princeton, Yale, and Harvard.

Mel put his J.D. and M.P.A. degrees to good use as a Professor of Law creating innovative courses that sensitized juniors, seniors, and MBA students not only to the legal rules involved in business law and criminal justice cases but also to the challenges posed when government administration becomes involved in these subject areas. After retiring from university teaching, Mel arrived “full circle” in terms of his using his law degree with the “aloha spirit” to help others – His final work position was as a “Public Policy Advocate” at the Office of Hawaiian Affairs (OHA), where he drafted legislative testimony supporting programs that would better the future for lower-income Native Hawaiians.