

**Transcription of Melvin “Mel” Masuda’s Office of Hawaiian Affairs Remembrance
Office of Hawaiian Affairs Board of Trustees meeting 3/20/2025 via Zoom**

Chair Kahele:

Before we move on with our agenda, I'd like to take this moment to recognize a very special individual. You know, it's never easy to lose a member of your family. It's never easy to lose someone who is part of our OHA family. And so it's with profound sadness that you know we announce and honor the life of Melvin Masuda who passed away just a few days ago. At this time, the board of trustees would like to call up our Director of Culture and Hawaiian affairs, Hailama Farden, who will take a few moments to share the breadth and the depth in the life of Melvin Masuda and how special an individual he was.

Hailama Farden:

Lei hali'a aloha for Melvin Madison Masuda. Aloha, chair, trustees, 'ohana. I found the scripture that I thought fitting for Melvin. It's from Psalms 82:3-4. "Defend the weak and the fatherless. Uphold the cause of the poor and oppressed. Rescue the weak and needy. Deliver them from the hands of the wicked." I believe these scriptures characterize Melvin very well.

Melvin Masuda was born and was more than just a legal scholar, journalist, educator. He was a warrior of justice, a defender of the people, and a steadfast advocate for native Hawaiian rights. Born in 1943 to first generation Japanese immigrants, Melvin's life was a testament to perseverance, excellence, and unwavering commitment to righteousness. From a young age, Melvin demonstrated insatiable curiosity and the deep seated belief in the power of words and action. He was a paperboy for Honolulu Star Bulletin Advertiser, an early indication of his lifelong relationship with journalism and truth telling.

By high school, he was already making waves writing over a hundred articles for the Student Council of O'ahu publication SCOOP, winning essay contests, and becoming a voice for his generation. His brilliance earned him a scholarship to Princeton, where he became the first Roosevelt High School graduate to attend this prestigious institution. At Princeton and later Yale Law School, Melvin sharpened his skills in advocacy, leadership, and law. As managing editor of The Daily Princetonian, he earned accolades for his writing and investigative journalism. His commitment to justice led him to Yale, where he earned a seat on the Yale Law Journal, the highest academic honor at that institution.

He clerked for chief justice William Richardson, where he contributed to landmark cases that shaped the legal landscape of Hawai'i. He further distinguished himself by earning a master's degree from Harvard University, making him one of the few individuals to have graduated from Princeton, Yale, and Harvard. But Melvin's calling was not just in academia. It was in the heart of the community. In the 1970s, he became a White House fellow, breaking barriers as the first first of Japanese ancestry to serve in this capacity.

Yet despite his national recognition, his heart remained in Hawai'i. He became a pro bono attorney for the Protect Kaho'olawe 'Ohana, fighting for the return of Kaho'olawe to the Hawaiian people. On my note, he is a founding member of PKO. He stood shoulder to shoulder with Kahu Abraham Akaka in a torchlight protest march against the injustices of the Hawai'i Land Reform Act. He was there when history called.

As an educator, Melvin nurtured generations of legal minds, serving as a professor of business law and real estate at the Hawai'i Pacific University for over two decades. He established legal programs, mentored students, and ensured that knowledge was a tool for empowerment. His 1994 article, "Do You Have to Be Hawaiian to Love the Land?" Eloquently captured his unwavering commitment to justice and his profound connection to the late George Jarrett Helm. Melvin also contributed to Hawaiian music history by writing the liner notes to George Helm's posthumous album and was a dedicated member of the Hawai'i Academy of Recording Arts.

Even in his later years, Melvin continued to fight for the voiceless. In 2019, he defended six defendants in the Kahuku Wind Farm case, proving that his passion for justice never wavered. In 2023, January 17th, he joined the Office of Hawaiian Affairs, an institution dedicated to advancing Native Hawaiian rights. It is no coincidence that his start date was January 17, the very anniversary of the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy. Melvin's life was interwoven with struggles and triumphs of the Hawaiian people.

Melvin Masuda's legacy is one of service, courage, unwavering dedication to the oppressed. His story echoes the very principles of Psalm 82:3-4 defending the weak, uplifting the needy, and delivering justice. Today, we honor him, not just as a scholar, a lawyer, a professor, but a champion of righteousness, a true protector of the land and the people of Hawai'i. Aloha 'oe Melvin. Your work lives in the justice you fought for, the students you inspired, and the hearts of all who have the privilege of knowing you. Mahalo ke akua.

Chair Kahele:

Mahalo Hailama, I know you worked really hard last night, through the wee hours of the morning to put that together. Ka Pouhana, do you have any words for Melvin on behalf of the administration? Then I'll give it over to our trustees.

Stacy Ferreira (Ka Pouhana - CEO):

I think I speak on behalf of all of the 'ohana here that Melvin was such a kind and gentle person. We all have our stories of Melvin, and I just share a really quick one with myself and our CEO, Kehau Pu'u. Every time we had an OHA event, Melvin would come to the office, and he would bring us lei because he felt it was really important that our leaders always wore a lei, for our special occasions. But I just think that that's very much a quintessential act that Melvin would do. Always kind, always thinking of others, very gentle and mild mannered. And I think I speak on behalf of all of us. He will be missed.

Chair Kahele:

Mahalo. Trustees;

(Unsure which male trustee spoke):

You know, I first met Melvin when I was appointed to the state senate, and Melvin was an attorney in the state senate. And if I remember correctly, he was an attorney on the minority side serving under former state senator Sam Slom and I believe, senator Fevella. And that's how I first got a chance to know Melvin. You know, it didn't matter if he was on the minority attorney team. He, you know, made it a point to come and seek out this young, you know, state senator who just got appointed and took the time to spend a little time mentoring me and teaching me a little bit of how the state senate works. I'm sure, our former senator Galuteria here can attest that Melvin knew most things, in the building that most people didn't know existed. And so

that's how I best remember Melvin. I was surprised when I came here to OHA, and our paths reunited again. And it was not just three weeks ago maybe where Melvin was sitting in the seat where trustee Waihe'e is right now, and I was sitting next to him where trustee Akina is. As you all know, I've been having an opportunity to meet with all of our different teams, and I met with the advocacy team, and Melvin sat right there. He introduced himself first and shared many of the things Hailama that you described. So, you know, I think looking at him now, smiling, wearing if I'm not mistaken, it's a Kamehameha warriors hat. Is that at our most recent 'Onipa'a march? That's amazing. And so that's how I will best remember him. I would also find him sometimes sitting in our board, I guess, suite, what's the word for it? Promenade walkway or whatever. He would just be sitting in there and hanging out with, you know, former trustees that have served, at the Office of Hawaiian affairs. And so I will remember him most for that and what an amazing individual he was.

Chair Kahele:

Trustee Galuteria

Brickwood Galuteria:

Thank you, chair. I do this very often, but I would like the words of the previous speaker to be entered into the record as if they were my own and also add that, Melvin had a unique, he blurred the lines so well between partisan groups, between the blue, the red. He blurred the line between ethnicities. So he was just living proof that, you know, greatness came in small packages too. So we wanna aloha Melvin. Wherever he is, he's looking down on us right now.

Mahalo. Thank you, chair.

Chair Kahele:

Any other trustees? If not at this time oh, excuse me. Trustee Akina.

Keli'i Akina:

I truly wish that I had known Melvin better. The word that comes to me from just the few times that I was able to meet him is humility. He was a man of such distinguished background, excellence in his profession, commitment to the cause of Native Hawaiians, and yet he would sit there in an unassuming posture and always treat others with great respect. He's one of the people whom I aspire to be like when I grow up. May the Lord bless our dear Melvin.

Chair Kahele:

Trustee Akaka

Kalei Akaka:

Mahalo. I wanna mahalo Hailama for putting together such a well thought out mindful, it's like a eulogy for Melvin here, and I was so comforted to see his work alongside my 'anakala, uncle Kawai, also known as, Kahu Abraham Akaka. And, I feel it's been such an honor to have Melvin, serve his final years here at the Office of Hawaiian Affairs, and it's with such great honor that I learned more about his background here and I think we all are able to take a moment of pause to be able to see such, dignity and aloha in the work that one can do in their years on this earth. And I just wanted to say mahalo, mahalo to Melvin, and I hope that you are celebrating up above with those that you have worked with through the years and through time and that you are in love and peace with your 'ohana and friends and your colleagues through the years. And,

if it's alright, if we can all take a moment of a ho'omalū, silence, so that we can honor our dear Melvin. Mahalo.

At this time, I'd like to ask everyone to rise. We're gonna take a one minute moment of silence for Melvin Masuda.

