Tribute To Professor Chris Iijima.

Introduction by Shawn L.M. Benton ’05.

We have heard how Chris Iijima fought for social justice while living in New York City and stories of his activism in the anti-war and Asian American movements. We were awed when we saw the video of Chris singing on the “Mike Douglas Show” hosted by John Lennon and Yoko Ono and heard the music he wrote as a member of the music group, Yellow Pearl, or on his own.

We have also witnessed Chris’s accomplishments as a professor at the William S. Richardson School of Law. We were lucky to have him continue the legacy of the illustrious line of Pre-Admission Directors. However, there is something that hides deep within each of Chris’s students that only they know – the lasting impact he had on each of their lives.

Since Chris’s passing, reaching into that part of the soul and telling that story has been difficult for some. A few of Chris’s former students were willing to share reflections on how he affected their lives:

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Shirley N. Garcia, Pre-Admission Program 1999, Attorney, Hawaii Civil Rights Commission and Interim Director of the Pre-Admission Program:

I first met Chris Iijima in the Fall of 1999. Almost 7 years have gone by now. Time sure flies. I was asked to write something short about how Chris affected or changed my life. I think the story is still continuing, and hopefully will continue for the rest of my life. But, up to this point, with the Summer of 2006 quickly approaching, I can say this little bit. It has been a constant thought in my mind these last few months.

If you are lucky, you will have one special person in your life who helps you move a little bit closer to the person you want to be. Chris Iijima is one of those people in my life. I first met him as an incoming Pre-Admission Student. As the Director of the Pre-Admission Program, he was “our” Professor, our Chris. But, over my
3.5 years of law school, he became more than my law school professor. He was (and remains) a source of inspiration, admiration, wisdom, and, just simply, an example of a good person. For me, Chris’s life is a testament to commitment, to struggle, and to perseverance.

And, even though he is no longer a phone call away, he is a place of reference that I can go to when I am scared or put in doubt – by a continuing injustice in the world, by an unfamiliar situation, by a role I never imagined myself undertaking. The thing with Chris was that he made you feel comfortable acknowledging your fears, he allowed you to be confused, but, then, he would always tell you to move on from that place of impotence to constructive action.

I came to law school wanting to correct the many injustices facing Native Hawaiians. I was hopeful, but that was a long time ago. Now I cringe when reading the newspapers or hearing the arguments made by those wanting to perpetuate injustice. There are days I just want to turn my back on it all. But, Chris taught me how to accept my fears and uncertainties, and not to be conquered by them. He did this by admitting his own fears about the world we lived in, his own confusion over human nature and the absurdity that exists in the world. Then he would encourage us to work through the uncertainty. The result may be some tangible action or it may just be a new line of thinking that remains latent until another day. He did this with a sense of humor, bravado, as well as vulnerability.

So, in short, how did Chris Iijima affect my life – I don’t think I have the answer to that question right now. I think he made me a little bit braver to speak out against injustice, as well as being a little bit more accepting of myself and others. But one thing I do know, in the end, the answer will ultimately come down to love – love of self, love for others, and love for the greatest of ideals that he believed in, that he committed his life to, and that he encouraged his students to believe and have hope in – justice, acceptance and love.

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Leslie Patacsil, Pre-Admission Program 2002
Law Clerk for the Honorable Greg K. Nakamura, Circuit Court of the Third Circuit:

I had the honor of being a pre-admission student and having Chris Iijima as my advisor and mentor. When admitted, I expected nothing
more than academic advice and some tutoring from Chris. However, it became apparent that Chris would provide me more than this. As most of my classmates can relate, the first year of law school is challenging because of the many adjustments we have to make in our personal lives. I, myself, encountered financial, family, and personal issues within the first several months of law school. Living in Hawai'i with no family, I had difficulties seeking help and support in these areas. Chris unconditionally stepped in and gave me the type of "family support" lacking in my life.

Chris checked in with me periodically and always left his office door open to talk about school and life. I recall a certain period when things were overwhelming for me and I would seek Chris's support on a daily basis. Again, Chris took the time away from his own matters to listen and guide me through my hardships.

I later learned that during this "overwhelming" time frame, Chris was experiencing the first of his many physical problems, but never said anything about it. Instead, he held himself out strong for all of us that sought his help. Even when Chris walked with his cane at school, he never spoke of his condition. When I frequently asked him "are you ok?" Chris would answer with a question, "how are YOU doing?" It was just like Chris to take the attention away from himself and put the focus on others.

Many people know how much Chris has contributed to social and racial justice, but little are aware of his accomplishments in changing peoples' personal lives. I miss my mentor, my friend, my family, Chris. But I know that his passion and spirit will continue through the work of the people whose lives he touched.

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Shawn M. Benton, Pre-Admission Program 2002
Attorney, Leong Kunihiro Leong & Lezy:

Since I was raised by my mother, who had to care for my sister and me, money was tight but our basic needs were provided. It was not until later that I understood why I couldn’t get that pair of Z Cavaricci jeans or why we could only eat out at McDonald’s on Friday nights. I will be the first to admit that my idea of becoming a lawyer was a selfish one—to make money and to, as I used to say, “play with the big boys.” My idea of justice at that time was to win for my clients no matter who they were. Then I met Professor Chris Iijima on my first day of law school. He was gruff, with a bark that could
chase any bad spirit away, but he had a heart of gold. He started me on a path that I never thought I would follow.

Chris always encouraged his students to look at everything around us, to look outside of the box (except when it came to Contracts), to see the kind of injustice that was happening. At that time, I didn’t understand what he meant or maybe I just didn’t want to listen. However, Chris must have known that I was hearing him. As law school went on, the realities of injustice and inequality began to surface and my future began to look very different.

I remember the moment when I realized that I would spend a part of my life fighting for justice. It was during my second year at law school that my focus was no longer on myself, but on those life changing issues that were happening: the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in Grutter v. Bollinger and Rice v. Cayetano; the attacks on Kamehameha School; Guantanamo Bay; the effects of September 11, 2001; the death of Fred Korematsu; and the attack on women’s rights in the court system. I realized that law could be used in the most egregious ways to suppress the rights of those who most needed help from the law; let me tell you, it was really getting to me. The effect it had on me was so overwhelming that I considered removing myself from the legal field.

During my third year, I saw Chris. He arrived at the law school with Jane [his wife] to speak with the new Pre-Admission students. It was a festive time, but a heartfelt one as well. Although Chris’s health was not up to par (and with Jane by his side trying to get him to go home so that he could rest), he made sure he spoke with everyone briefly, even if was just to say a quick “hello”.

Before Chris left, he saw me and, of course, he asked me ‘how are you doing?’ With my mentor in front of me looking thin and frail and my heart filled with sorrow over the injustices that were being revealed to me, I looked at him and began crying. I told him, “I realize what you’ve been teaching us and I don’t think my heart can handle it.” He told me, “Sad isn’t it? I’m glad you’ve finally seen it. So what are you going to do about it?” It was at that point I knew that I could not let my knowledge of the law and my ability to practice slip away.

Chris chose me to be a part of the Pre-Admission Program for a reason. He saw something in my law school application that no one else saw. He wrote, “[p]erhaps most significantly, there is a culture
and tradition within the Program that emphasized the ultimate goal was not solely for Pre-Admission students simply to ‘do well’ or even to graduate, but for Pre-Admission students to lead the law school and to work for societal change as lawyers after graduation.” Chris K. Iijima, *Separating Support From Betrayal: Examining the Intersections of Racialized Legal Pedagogy, Academic Support, and Subordination*, 33 Ind. L. Rev. 737, 777 (2000). I am honored to be a part of the tradition that Chris eloquently identified and to continue the fight for equality and justice.

Sandra Kim, Pre-Admission Program 2004 Law Student, 2L:

Although I met Chris sporadically throughout my first year, I was blessed to have our paths cross while I faced one of the greatest challenges in my life—first year in law school. Chris was undoubtedly an individual I revered with the same utmost respect and admiration that I have for my mom and dad.

I know my good fortune of getting into law school had much to do with my personal statement and a little to do with my LSAT score. As I am finishing up my 2L year, I can say with confidence that law school is much more than what LSAT scores may claim to prophesize.

In my personal statement, I explain how my parents raised me by the motto, “Always Try Three Times Harder.” As a young girl with immigrant parents from Korea, life was naturally difficult because of language and financial barriers. However, growing up, I was always happy, made the best of what I had, and I knew I could do anything with a good education under my belt and unconditional support from my parents. Growing up this way built character—a compassionate heart, a good head on my shoulders, and a zest for life. So, I lived trying three times harder than others in everything I did. I was fortunate to never fall short and often times found me ahead. It wasn’t until law school that I felt that my best wasn’t good enough. For the first time in my life, persevering through academic challenges, adjusting to a new social setting, and dealing with the economic strain that law school brings were challenges that I wasn’t prepared to face all at once.

I was instantly drawn to Chris because I saw a part of me in him. He had the same zest for life, believed in the same values that brought
me to law school, and worked tirelessly for a more “just” society through his teaching and leadership. Through my brief encounters with Chris during study sessions and pep talks, Chris reinvigorated my drive to try three times harder. He reminded me that the most important aspect of law school was not the letter grades or how many articles I have published, but to remember the reason why I was in law school. Chris said that my personal goals toward justice would always be an uphill battle, meaning, in order to achieve what I came to law school to do, I would always need to work three times harder than the others.

Meeting Chris at such a crucial point in my life strengthened my drive to persevere not only through law school, but also the many adversities that lay ahead of me. Learning about Chris’ amazing accomplishments and knowing how much more he wanted to do for the law school, Hawaii, and the world, I know I have my share of the work cut out for me. Thanks to Chris, I am still reaching for my dreams, never giving up, and always trying three times harder.