FIRST PERSON

TEACHER . . . MENTOR . . . FRIEND

A UH Law School Graduate Remembers Chris Iijima
On Sept. 20, I attended the Hawai‘i premiere of Tadashi “Tad” Nakamura’s new film, “A Song For Ourselves,” on the life of my teacher, mentor and friend — Chris Iijima. I felt bittersweet as I sat in the audience watching the film, because it brought back so many memories of a man who impacted my life in so many profound ways. Very simply put, watching this film about Chris made me miss him, and for a brief moment, I suddenly felt a sadness for the loss of him, a feeling I hadn’t experienced since his passing in December of 2005.

At the same time, however, gathered with me
on this night were people from different generations and various walks of life, all of whom seemed to have been touched in some way by Chris and his legacy — Chris’ family, friends, law school professors, teachers, lawyers, students, community leaders, activists, musicians, filmmakers and visual artists, to name a few — and I realized how many people Chris had inspired and influenced in his lifetime and beyond through his work as a social activist, a musician, a community builder, a lawyer, an academic, a believer in social justice, and a man who deeply loved his family and friends. Indeed, the people who came to celebrate Chris’ life on this night truly reflected the person that Chris was and the color and love with which he lived his life. With this realization, I felt blessed to have had Chris in my life and was reminded of my obligation to pass on the ideals, lessons and wisdom that
Chris in his lifetime had taught me.

My first encounter and memory of Chris was his phone call to me in the spring of 1999. I was in my last semester at the University of Washington in Seattle and had recently applied for admission to the University of Hawai‘i William S. Richardson School of Law. For me, law school seemed to be the vehicle to carry out my goals of improving conditions of my home island of Guam, a United States territory in the Pacific, and my people, the Chamorros, the native people of Guam and the surrounding Marianas islands, who have faced centuries of oppression and subjugation at the hands of larger Western colonial powers.

Chris called me unexpectedly on an overcast and rainy Seattle night. His voice was stern
yet comforting: “Is this TJ?” Upon responding “Yes,” he congratulated me on my admission to law school and introduced himself as the director of the Richardson School of Law’s pre-admission program. I was one of 12 students who had been selected for this program, although I was unclear about the nature of the program. From the information in my admissions packet, I gathered that it was a program that encouraged diversity with the goal being to serve communities underrepresented in the legal profession and in the law. I also learned that it would take me a little bit longer to complete law school.

Chris called me that night to welcome me into the program and answer any questions or concerns I had. What I remember about the conversation is that he made me feel comfortable and valued as a person, thoughtfully pointing out my goals of serving my community on Guam by attending law school, representing to me that the pre-admission program and the law school could help me further those goals, and that I could be an important contributor to the mission of the program. In this initial conversation with Chris, his words and voice appeared genuine — he had already inspired me. I felt that my decision to come to Hawai‘i for law school and be part of the pre-admission program was grounded in the right place. This conversation also gave me a keen sense that my connection with Chris would be something special.
special.

When I arrived in Honolulu for law school later that year, the Chris Iijima I envisioned on the phone was not the Chris Iijima I met in person. For some reason, I had pictured Chris to be a taller, younger, possibly hip Asian academic. Rather, the Chris I met was a shorter, older (at the time “older,” meant anyone over 50), marginally disgruntled and stern Asian academic with a thick mustache and who wore a slightly wrinkled aloha shirt, black stone-washed jeans and black sneakers. Although I was initially intimidated by him and his appearance and tough exterior, I later learned that Chris was really the most vulnerable, caring and compassionate person one could know.
It didn’t take long for me and my fellow pre-admits (the term given to pre-admission students by the law school community) to appreciate Chris’ role as a mentor and teacher. He, of course, emphasized the academic rigors and hardships of law school and with his legal intellect and experience, made sure we worked hard, that he challenged us and kept us focused. As pre-admission students, we would often face adversity and scrutiny from members of the law school community because of our status as an “alternative” program. Chris, however, always reminded us to have confidence and pride in our program and encouraged us to work together and find strength and comfort in each other. He also reminded us that our success was integral to the success of the program, whose mission was to produce lawyers who could serve communities in need throughout Hawai‘i and the Pacific. The program consistently produced students who became law school student leaders, successful lawyers, judges, politicians and legal academics in Hawai‘i and across the Pacific that were doing important work serving their communities. Most importantly, however, Chris taught us to maintain our humility, compassion and a sense of ourselves as we forged through law school and practiced as attorneys. Before we became law students and soon-to-be-lawyers, he reminded us of our humanity and emphasized the importance of making contributions to a purpose greater than ourselves.

Chris believed that his ability to be an effective teacher and mentor to us was tied to his understanding of each of our own personal lives and stories. With that in mind, he made himself available to us at all times and often set aside time to get together with us individually and collectively away from the law school environment. He would regularly invite us to his home for potluck gatherings with his wife, Jane, and sons, Alan and Christopher. We talked, sang songs, laughed and found it OK to just be who we were outside the formal trappings of the law school. Chris and his family became our family, and at times we found ourselves having conversations with him more about our personal struggles, relationships, goals and joys than about law school itself. As much as we opened up to Chris, he opened his soul to us. In retrospect, I believe Chris created this relationship of understanding and love with us to remind us that our professional and personal lives should be guided by our humanity and ability to have sincere, honest relationships with others.

I was also privileged to have shared the gift of playing and writing music with Chris during my time in law school. Prior to entering law school, I didn’t know that Chris was a musician and I don’t think he knew of my love for playing music, either. I guess we kind of stumbled upon each other’s talents and love for music during our informal gatherings. Our playing music together became commonplace and I found that our musical styles complemented each other beautifully. We seemed to share the same perspectives on the power of music and songwriting as tools to touch, educate, inspire and bring
This photo of TJ Quan’s pre-admission program classmates was taken in December 1999 after the students had completed their first semester of law school. Chris Iijima treated the students to a congratulatory dinner at Duke’s in Waikiki and celebrated with them. Standing (from left): R. Hokulei Lindsey, TJ Quan, Chris Iijima, Michelle Puu-Lozier, Shellie Park-Hoapili, Joaquin Manibusan, Sonja McCullen, Mark Cokee. Kneeling: Anna Vidad (left) and Shirley Garcia. Not pictured: Chandara Hu-Swenson. (Photo courtesy of TJ Quan)
people together. In the same vein, music was an opportunity to express ourselves and channel our frustrations and stresses of the day in a positive way.

Through our playing together, I discovered how Chris had used the power of music to mobilize and empower Asian Americans across the nation during the civil rights movement. I also learned that Chris' music was a reflection of his personal journey — growing up in the Asian American civil rights movement and finding a voice, discovering multiethnic L.A., coming to live in Hawai'i for his family and discovering Hawai'i’s physical and cultural beauty. These were all stories told through his music.

Like Chris, I had used music as a way to document my own struggles and the struggles of my people. I found solace in music as a way to speak out. With our shared love for music and its power, Chris and I were inspired to write a song about the students in the pre-admission program, people we were proud of and sought to celebrate through our music. We called the song, "'ōhi'a Lehua," for the beautiful, delicate flower that flourishes in the harshest of places, in barren, desolate lava fields on Hawai'i island. To us, the 'ōhi'a lehua blossom was a metaphor for how pre-admission students in law school were constantly subjected to adversity, but managed to ultimately thrive as successful law students and contributing members of the legal profession and their communities. Little did we know that years later, "'ōhi'a Lehua" would inspire the renaming of the pre-admission program to the Ulu Lehua Scholars Program, which would in turn create a dynamic, positive shift in the law school’s celebration of the program and the way it was perceived.
After I finished law school and entered the practice of law, Chris continued to be a source of inspiration and guidance for me in my personal and professional life. He was there when I graduated from law school, when I passed the Hawai‘i bar examination and was sworn in to the Hawai‘i State Bar. He was there when I started working at my first job out of law school, clerking for a Circuit Court judge. He was able to witness my professional development as a public defender, assisting indigent, low-income persons accused of crimes, and then as a private civil attorney working for a public interest firm committed to protecting Native Hawaiian rights and entitlements. I believe he was proud of my chosen path, because I was helping those in need and contributing to my community. I guess I was continuing the cycle: As Chris had given to me, I had taken his lessons and was now giving to others through my work.
As Chris’ health waned in the year before his death, I saw less and less of him. Despite this, I am thankful that I was able to see him one last time a few months before his passing. In this one last meeting, in spite of his weakness and suffering, I saw Chris’ spirit come alive in our talk about my work and our families, and I remember distinctly the last words we said to each other — “I love you.” I am deeply thankful for this moment, because I was able to tell Chris how I felt about him and the impact he had made on my life after all the years of knowing him.

It’s been almost four years since Chris’ passing, and yet he is still a source of guidance for me. There have been many times during various personal and professional struggles over the years that I’ve asked Chris for help or thought about what kind of advice he would give me if he were alive. Sometimes answers come, sometimes they don’t — but always, in the midst of these moments, a feeling of peace and calm comes over me. I truly believe that this is Chris’ spirit watching over me and reminding me that compassion, humility and love should always guide me, not only in the practice of law, but more importantly, in living my life.

Thank you, Chris, for being a part of my journey and for helping me live my life with humanity and higher purpose.

The author of this essay, Anthony “TJ” Quan, with Professor Chris Iijima at TJ’s graduation from the University of Hawai’i’s William S. Richardson School of Law in 2002.

Anthony “TJ” Quan, who grew up in Sinajana, Guam, is an attorney with the Native Hawaiian Legal Corporation. Quan earned his bachelor’s degree in political science from the University of Washington and his law degree from the University of Hawai’i’s William S. Richardson School of Law in 2002. He still plans to return to his home in Guam to serve and contribute to his community.