Chris Iijima: Teacher ... Mentor ... Friend

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LEAD STORY

CREATIVE ACTIVISM

Film on Late UH Law Professor Inspires Discussion on Creative Activism
Kevin Kawamoto  
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The lecture hall at the University of Hawai‘i’s William S. Richardson School of Law was packed to capacity on Sept. 24 as people crowded in to hear panelists talk about “Creative Modern Activism,” a topic inspired by the life and accomplishments of Chris Iijima, a former UH law professor who died in 2005 from a rare disease called amyloidosis.

Iijima, originally from New York, joined the UH law faculty in 1998 and quickly made his mark in legal education. He received the law school’s Outstanding Professor of the Year award in 2000 and the university’s Excellence in Teaching award the next year. He was devoted to the law school’s Ulu Lehua Scholars Program, which, as described in the school’s Web site, “provides selected students from legally underserved communities who have overcome adversity and demonstrated their academic potential, leadership ability, and commitment to social justice with an opportunity to obtain a legal education.”

Ulu Lehua was a program that nicely meshed with Iijima’s background as a social activist, someone whose social change work was dem-

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Members of the panel included Tadashi Nakamura, Malama Minn, Mari Matsuda, Bambu and Ara Laylo.

(Photoby Mike Orbito)
onstrated through a combination of political advocacy and creative output.

"Chris in his own time was very modern," said Eric K. Yamamoto, a UH law professor who knew Iijima and moderated the panel.

Yamamoto described Iijima as an advocate "for peace, for justice and for communities." He emerged as an activist and musician at a pivotal time in history.

"He was at the cultural forefront of the Asian American movement," Yamamoto said. "A movement by people who felt invisible and felt like they did not have a voice."

Iijima had a voice — in more ways than one. In his younger days, the late 1960s and early 1970s, he traveled the country, singing songs about issues that were at the heart of the then-embryonic Asian American movement, which grew out of the larger civil rights movement of that same era.

"We're talking about an individual [who] changed the face and the landscape of Asian Pacific America," noted California assemblyman Warren Furutani in a documentary film about Iijima's life. (The film by Tadashi Nakamura was the subject of a cover story in the Sept. 18 issue of The Hawai'i Herald and had a public screening after the panel discussion at the law school.)

Iijima sang with Nobuko Miyamoto, a duo whose voices complemented each other in both harmony and politics. Later, musician "Charlie" Chin joined them. They performed as Yellow Pearl, and their recordings reveal a talent equal or superior to better-known singers from that era. Yellow Pearl's socially riveting commentary — Iijima wrote the lyrics for many of their songs — was heard at rallies, churches and on college campuses throughout the United States. Iijima and Miyamoto were even introduced on the Mike Douglas Show, a popular 1970s television program, by former Beatle John Lennon with his wife Yoko Ono sitting by his side.

Yamamoto said Iijima knew that the way to move people was not just with the mind but also with the heart. Nakamura's documentary revealed many facets of Iijima's intricate life: a talented singer and songwriter; a parent, husband and son; a passionate social activist whose influence was felt from coast to coast. One thing that he was not, however, was someone eager to commercialize his art. He made a conscious decision not to pursue a professional entertainment career and rather devoted himself to education. After teaching elementary school students in Manhattan, he decided to go to law school. That decision eventually led to his accepting a position at UH law school.
his work as a documentary filmmaker and the socially relevant topics that have captured his imagination. Nakamura’s parents, filmmakers Robert A. Nakamura and Karen L. Ishizuka, were in the audience. Tadashi’s “A Song for Ourselves,” which was screened after the panel, profiles Iijima’s life and music. It has won critical acclaim across different venues and is a work of conceptual and technological sophistication, providing audiences with a look into the life of a man whose contributions to the Asian American movement have been significant but not widely publicized.

Also on the panel was Filipino American hip-hop artist Bambu, who hails from the Watts district of Los Angeles. He has worked with Filipino youth in L.A. and is starting a family of his own. Bambu’s lyrics often address social problems and injustices — sweatshops, domestic violence, sexual exploitation — and he gets many people to think about these issues through a provocative mix of words and sounds in performance.

“What I found really intriguing [about Iijima] was his family life,” Bambu said. How do you balance an activist life and a family life? Iijima directly addresses this question in the film. Iijima’s parents were politically active individuals in New York. When he was a boy, Iijima’s father took him to hear Martin Luther King Jr. speak at a large gathering in Washington, D.C. His mother organized Asian Americans for political action.

“My mom and dad taught me,” Iijima said in the film, “that you can be political and you can be a human being, with a family, with a job — that you can make your life a ‘normal’ life and have politics be a part of it.”

Panelist Malama Minn, a UH law school graduate, participated in the Ulu Lehua program during her law school years. Prior to entering college, she attended school in Hāna,
Maui. Now as an attorney, she feels she can be an example to students whose aspirations may not have included professional careers. She has talked to students at her alma mater and hopes to inspire young people to pursue their dreams.

Promoter, musician and graphic design instructor Ara Laylo has used her professional career to help publicize diverse talent — like female bands — which often have a difficult time getting promoted and booked at clubs. She said her work has been motivated by a desire to facilitate positive change in the community.

Law professor Mari Matsuda completed the panel session by declaring her admiration for those sitting beside her. "I'm in love with everybody on this panel," Matsuda said. She praised each person's creative activism in making the world a more just place.

Matsuda noted Iijima's refusal to go mainstream and commercialize his music/activism, and spoke of how ordinary people can exercise their collective power to dismantle social injustice in many different social arenas such as gender inequality in sports, health care disparities and environmental destruction.

Iijima's love for his family was mentioned more than once at the law school event and was a highlight in Nakamura's documentary film. His parents Kazu and Tak, wife Jane and sons Alan and Christopher figure prominently in the film, as they obviously did in his life.

Chris Iijima personified creative modern activism during the 1970s. He and Yellow Pearl found and shared their voice and, no doubt, emboldened other Asian Americans to find theirs. The lyrics from one of his songs pretty much says it all: "I looked in the mirror and I saw me, and I didn't want to be any other way. Then I looked around, and I saw you. And it was the first time I knew who we really are."

After Iijima died, hundreds attended memorials in his honor. Although he did not seek celebrity status in his life, he was remembered for his courage, his advocacy and his leadership — and in the eyes of many who paid him tribute, he was nothing less than a shining star. (H)

Kevin Kawamoto is an associate professor in the School of Communications at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. He is a frequent contributor to The Hawai'i Herald.
“I looked in the mirror and I saw me, and I didn’t want to be any other way. Then I looked around, and I saw you. And it was the first time I knew who we really are.” — Lyrics from a Chris Iijima song. (Photo courtesy Tad Nakamura, from “A Song For Ourselves”)
DVD copies of “A Song For Ourselves” were available for purchase at the Creative Modern Activism event. (Photo by Mike Orbito)