

FEATURES

Nuuanu YMCA still brings cultures together after more than 100 years on Oahu

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CINDY ELLEN RUSSELL / 2004

The YMCA summer program for kids offers swim instruction. Nuuanu YMCA swim instructors teach keiki how to swim

Most of us have driven past the Nuuanu YMCA at Vineyard Boulevard and Pali Highway, but you might not know it was originally across the street from its current location, in the parking lot where Longs and Safeway are today. And it was a historic first in the world.

This particular YMCA was groundbreaking in bringing together Chinese, Korean, Filipino and Japanese ethnicities to associate in friendship. Before that they had separate, racial YMCAs.

You might think this happened in the 1960s, when the civil rights era was strong, but in actuality it happened over 100 years ago, back in 1918!

The idea began with YMCA General Secretary Lloyd Killam, according to Gwenfread E. Allen's book "The Y.M.C.A. in Hawaii, 1869-1969." One Friday evening in 1916, as he was driving an old open Model T Ford, from one ethnic Y to another, the skies opened up. "Soon the streets were filled with water from curb to curb, and I was thoroughly soaked.

"It suddenly occurred to me, why not put the four racial Y's into one building?"



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Despite substantial differences in language, education and social standing, they found a way to come together. Japan occupied Korea then, which many thought would be a stumbling block, but somehow members were able to get past that.

C.K. Ai, creator of City Mill, was one of the Nuuanu YMCA's founders, as was Dr. Syngman Rhee, former president of Korea. Businessman Frank Atherton, Dr. William Westervelt of the Hawaiian Historical Society and Dr. Iga Mori, vice president of the Pan Pacific Union.

The spirit of Hawaii, they believed, and the spirit of the YMCA both favored interracial friendships. That was one of its founding principles. Training the next generation on their duties as American citizens was another.

They felt the all-around, well-developed young man had four sides to his life: intellectual, physical, social and religious.

They wanted to build a community with young men of good character, rather than hoodlums; interracial friendship rather than racial strife; and spiritual-minded citizens interested in the social welfare of all.

In 1917 the decision to unite moved forward, former YMCA President Don Anderson told me. "Prior to this there was only one place in the entire world where different races shared one YMCA, and that was Kansas City (Mo.)."

Initially, Hawaiians and Caucasians tended to go to the Central YMCA at Hotel and Alakea streets, but over time, members went to the Y that was most convenient to them.

The Hawaii experiment came to be seen as the association world's most notable achievement in racial integration.

Possible names considered were the Interracial YMCA and the Oriental YMCA, but as it opened at the entrance to Nuuanu Valley, the name came into focus as the Nuuanu YMCA.

The new YMCA opened in 1918 and within six years had a gymnasium and pool. From the beginning it was a beehive of activity, with club meetings, night school, social events and sports activities including volleyball, basketball, indoor baseball, swimming and tennis.

Social activities centered around the cafeteria. Committee and club meetings were often held at meal hours.

Courses were offered in English, math, spelling, bookkeeping, typewriting and business letters.

An average of 400 people used the facilities each day, it was reported in 1923, and the number was increasing. It was hard to find rooms for all the activities members wanted to engage in.

Many prominent Hawaii leaders acknowledged their debt to the Nuuanu YMCA in shaping their lives, including Sen. Daniel Inouye, Sen. Hiram Fong, Chinn Ho and the Rev. Abraham Akaka.



Anderson remembers sitting in Inouye's Washington, D.C., office, and he said, "Don, I really wanted to join the Boy Scouts, but my mother told me that we were a very poor family and we could not afford the uniforms. That day she took me to the Nuuanu YMCA and signed me up."

Former police commissioner Roland Sagum said he was raised in the worst part of Honolulu.

"The building I lived in was a den of gamblers and thieves." He joined the Nuuanu YMCA, and "from that day my life changed. Without the YMCA I don't know where I might have gone — the reformatory, probably, and then perhaps the penitentiary.

"My desire to live right and serve my fellow man was given to me by the Nuuanu YMCA. Any success I have I owe to it."



The Nuuanu YMCA was also the site of another "first." The first time karate was demonstrated outside of Japan was there in 1927.

In that year the elder statesman of Okinawan karate, Kentsu Yabu, stopped in Hawaii. Over 700 people attended a demonstration of this martial art at the Nuuanu YMCA, according to newspaper reports.

In 1963 Fort Street was expanded and named Pali Highway. The 45-year-old, termite-eaten, wood-framed YMCA buildings were in the way and were torn down. It moved across the street into a sparkling new, \$1.6 million three-story building.

The new YMCA had a 75-by-42-foot swimming pool, a gymnasium, classrooms, dormitories, social spaces, locker rooms, tennis courts, a cafeteria and a snack shop.

Honolulu resident Linda Sakuma remembers Carl Stewart, a tall man who taught ballroom dancing at the Y. "He must have (tried) to teach half the high school kids in town to dance and be civilized at social events.

"Girls lined up on one side of the room, boys on the other. We were from many different schools, and that was the online dating of our day. I wonder how many of those budding romances ever ended in marriage?"

Former Waipahu High School student Ronnie Belasco said he remembers going to Saturday night dances at the Nuuanu YMCA in the late 1960s.

"There were live bands, and kids from various high schools would gather, dance and make friends. One of my favorite bands was the Cadientes from, I believe, Kaimuki High School. It was a great time!"

Manoa resident Hank Chapin remembers a local guy with impressive gray hair always yakking away in pidgin in the locker room at the Nuuanu Y.

"Since the Y would wash our gym clothes, his outfit never changed and, frankly, like all of us, he looked a bit raggedy. Clean, yes, but the clothes became tattered and faded after frequent trips to the Y's washing machine.

"One day I was watching TV, and a local politician came on speaking perfect English and dressed very neatly. He looked distinguished with carefully coiffed white hair — rather familiar. After a minute of thought, I suddenly realized that the handsome politician and the raggedy pidgin speaker were one and the same person: state Senate leader Dickie Wong.



“Many adroit local politicians are fluent in pidgin and standard English, and speak and dress appropriately depending on circumstances. It’s a talent.”



“I came to the Honolulu Y as its new president in 1989,” former YMCA President Don Anderson continued. “I stayed in the Nuuanu YMCA dormitory several nights without announcing who I was.

“I met a young, mentally challenged man who lived at the Y. It gave him his own place to live apart from his parents and also an independent life. He had friends there, participated in programs and even ate there. I was impressed by the caring nature of every staff member and thought, man, this is really a special place they have here.

“During my tenure I would see Gov. Linda Lingle in the pool and Gov. Neil Abercrombie in the weight room. Neil donated his famous yellow Checker cab to the Y as a fundraiser.

“The Nuuanu YMCA is the most complete Y I have ever seen,” Anderson said. “It does everything. There is a dormitory, a gym, a pool, a weight room, a cafeteria, huge teen programs, all kinds of classes, community meeting rooms and extensive programs for children. The Nuuanu Y does it all.”