

Going Full Circle with Lane in Gardena, California

Teacher, scholar, writer, community organizer, classical musician, blues guitarist, softball player, Volkswagen Beetle aficionado, fellow Gardenan, friend. That's the Lane Ryo Hirabayashi I knew. The blues guitarist Lane dates back to the 1960s. His moment with the VW bugs lasted through the 1980s. Softball Lane was part of a team comprised of Gardena Pioneer Project (GPP) volunteers in our informal but competitive league organized by Service of Asian American Youth. Most of the GPP players were graduates of Gardena High and even Peary Junior High. At that time, Gardena had the highest concentration of Japanese Americans on the mainland.



Left: Lane Hirabayashi with Irene Sunabe Tokumoto and Susie Ling. Middle: Lane with the Gardena Pioneer Project-UCLA Asian American Studies Center softball team. Right: Lane with Susie Ling (Nakano 1982)

It was in 1981 when I met Lane at the UCLA Asian American Studies Center. He was there to pursue a postdoctoral fellowship with the Institute of American Cultures. Lane was trying to figure out a direction to take his postdoctoral work. Redress was the hottest issue in the Japanese American community at the time, so it didn't take too much for us to persuade him to come check out the lively culture of redress taking place in Gardena at the time.

Lane Comes to Gardena

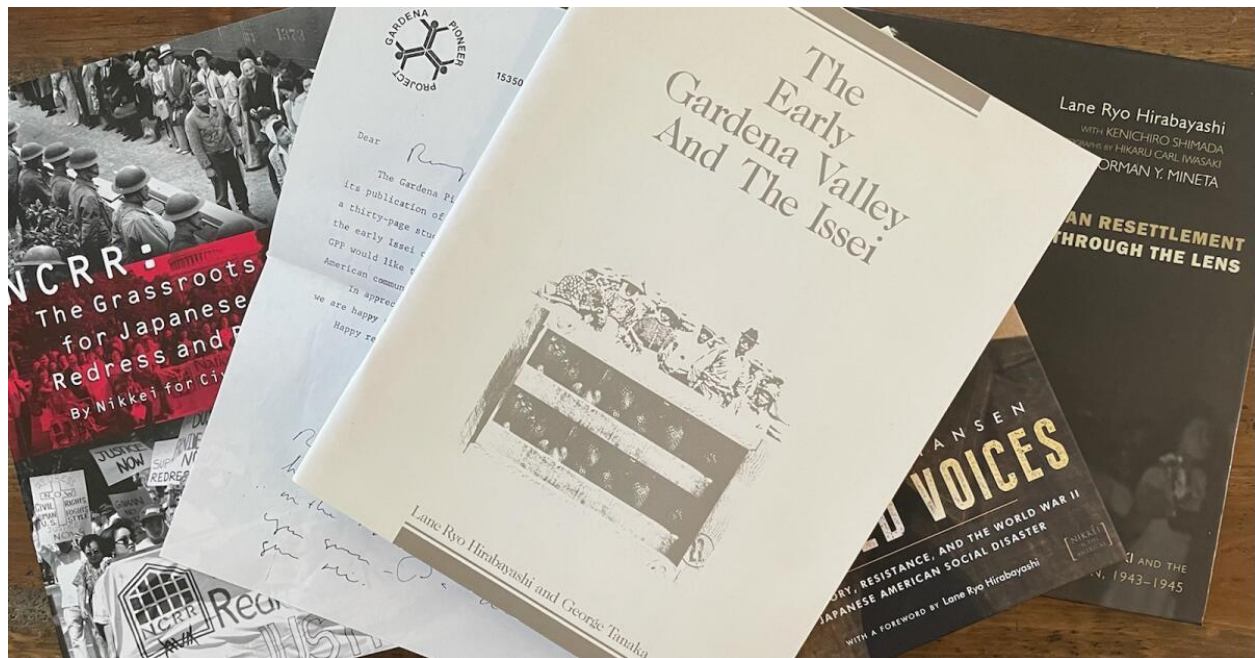
Gardena was one of the flashpoints for the redress movement, with members of the Japanese American Nisei community getting fired up against Lillian Baker who said the camp incarceration was for "their own good". That was the beginning of Lane's total immersion into the redress movement, serving as one of the founders of the Gardena Committee for Redress and Reparations, which then helped form the National Coalition for Redress and Reparations (NCRR).

Redress was not the only connection Lane had with Gardena. In 1982, he made Gardena his home. Lane joined Gardena Pioneer Project, an organization of Sansei to care for the elderly Japanese American population. He made good friendships in Gardena, including with George Tanaka, another Pioneer Project volunteer. Lane and George co-wrote "The Issei Community in Moneta and the Gardena Valley, 1900-1920" and "The Early Gardena Valley and the Issei". "I remember Lane for his humility and generosity, just as much for his academic prowess and social activism," says George.

New Journeys, New Relationships

A professorship at San Francisco State University and then University of Colorado pulled Lane out of Gardena to greener pastures. Lane forged an everlasting relationship with writer-scholar Marilyn Alquizola. But Lane is a loyal friend, and we would get together in intervals, sometimes with mutual friends. We were gifted many of his books. As the new century arrived, Lane and Marilyn returned to UCLA.

Lane reconnected with NCRR, which now stood for Nikkei for Civil Rights and Redress. For three years, he would serve as a key member of the editorial team that ultimately put together the 2018 UCLA Asian American Studies Center publication, *NCRR: The Grassroots Struggle for Japanese American Redress and Reparations*. It was a landmark publication.



Just a few of the many publications by or involving Lane Hirabayashi (Nakano 2021)

A Major Challenge

Later that same year, Lane encountered a major health challenge. As he would later write:

In late November 2018 I suddenly experienced trouble swallowing my food... I was officially diagnosed with esophageal cancer...

Before you worry, though, let me relate the following. Marilyn and I have gotten all sorts of support, first-and-foremost from Denise, our daughter, who is a health reporter for KABC here in LA. She hooked us up to all kinds of specialists and so I've gotten the best available readings on my scans, along with objective "second opinions," so I am confident that this is the best possible course of treatment for now...

Now that I have initiated treatment, I can see that I can get through this, and thus wanted to reach out and let you know these details. I'm moving ahead with confidence and an overall sense of optimism that I can shed this illness and get back to health. As always, Lane.

Re-Connecting with Lane

During the advent of the California stay-at-home initiative of 2020, we emailed back and forth, reflecting on Lane's road to recovery, growing older, and our enduring friendships. At the same time, our old group of Gardena Pioneer Project volunteers that met monthly month for Hawaiian breakfast, moved to Zoom.

I mentioned to Lane, “*You* are among the early volunteers of Gardena Pioneer Project, and it wouldn't be complete without you at our virtual breakfast meetings!” To which Lane responded, “It's really kind of you to think of inviting me to a GPP Sansei get-together. You don't know what that means to me. Especially as a *hapa* boy who largely grew up around no other Nikkei except for via my mediate Hira family. Maybe that's what drew me to GPP as kind of a second family in the So Cal setting. I felt like you guys cared about me even though I wasn't a local or really in syncs with a lot of what makes up JAs in the Gardena setting. I'm crying as I write this of course.” We always thought of Lane as one of us.

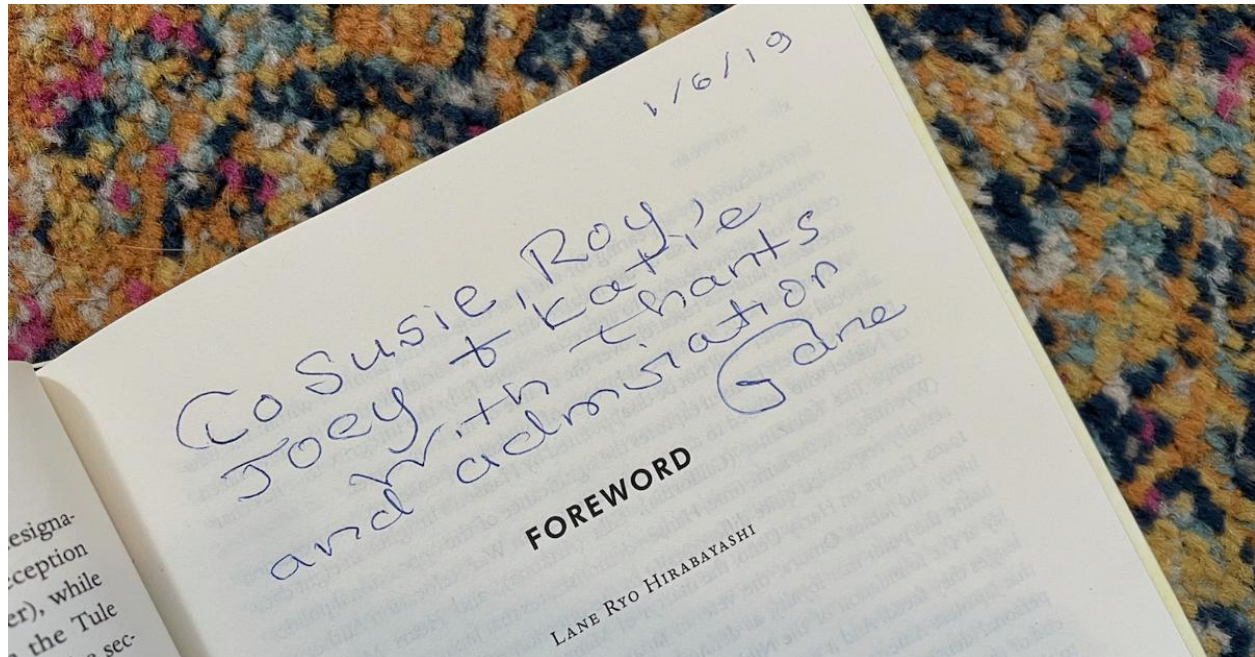
So, after almost 40 years, Lane rejoined the Gardenans. We usually talk about nothing in particular. Later, Lane shared his thoughts:

Hey Roy, thank you so much for convincing me to join the GPP virtual get-together this morning. It was interesting, fun, but most of all it really uplifted my spirits to see all of you and shoot the breeze.

After another virtual breakfast get-together a month later, Lane wrote, “I really enjoyed the virtual breakfast get-together last month. Is there going to be another one? Beyond that, how have y'all been doing? We're maybe getting a little stir-crazy but trying to stay home, keep away from Corona 19 germs. Best, Lane”.

All Things Must Pass

But Lane missed the next get-together. And the next one. Given his fragile condition, we were all mightily concerned. And then Marilyn broke the news to us, “It's so hard to have to tell you this, but Lane had passed... He told me to tell you that he loved you, Susie, and the rest of the old gang. It was good for him to have those couple of meetings with you on Zoom. He told me he enjoyed them... Thank you so much for everything through the years.” - *Marilyn, August 12, 2020.*



Lane Hirabayashi's loopy handwriting was endearing to many (Nakano 2021)

Upon hearing the news, my wife, Susie, tried to put some of her thoughts on an email:

We are so, so sorry to hear the sad news... All day, I'm remembering Lane. There are so many images: his loopy handwritten notes at Christmas time, taking him on a tour of LA when he first arrived (in early 1980s), his being my teacher, his boots, his guitar, sharing pumpkin soup with both of you, and seeing his many books. We're so happy we worked with Lane on the NCCR book. I'm so thankful that Lane worked with our daughter when she was at UCLA. I even have a memory of being with Lane in Sausalito. Most of all, we know Lane for his kindness. He was a listener. What a gentle soul. We are richer for having him be our teacher all these decades. Thank you for your email. Virtual hugs for now. – Susie, August 14, 2020

Glenn Oshima and Robert Shoji, two of the organizers of the GPP breakfast club, were reeling from the news, as we felt Lane was just getting back into the swing of things. An announcement to the whole group followed. We were so glad Lane was able to join us for those short moments in 2020.



Marilyn Alquizola and Lane Hirabayashi in Pasadena, California (Nakano 2017)

Remembering Lane

There were many levels to Dr. Lane Hirabayashi. He was the giant in Japanese Americans studies - author and editor of many seminal academic volumes, and he was the guy who melted when he earned his Ojiiichan title. He was the scholar juggling many research projects, and he was the friend who hand wrote Christmas hellos. Everybody so genuinely liked Lane that he was asked to be a participant in several wedding parties. There can be no higher praise than that Lane's uncle, parents, and grandparents would all be proud of Lane's personal legacy. We extend heartfelt thanks to his wife, Marilyn, and the family for letting us all share Lane's time, kindness, and heart. – Susie Ling

And for all the community organizations that had the fortune of Lane's involvement (and there were many), he made them better. It wasn't just his scholarly intellect, Lane had a sense of kindness, warmth and enthusiasm that made us all better. American culture is better because of Lane, but seeing Lane come back full circle to join his friends in Gardena is prominently etched in my mind. It is Lane, the friend, that endures most meaningfully.

- Roy Nakano

A leading scholar on the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II who spent decades trying to keep memories of the prison camps from being swept to the back pages of history, Lane Ryo Hirabayashi was also very much invested in the Japanese American community in Gardena, helping with the launching of the Gardena Chapter of NCRR, working with the Gardena Pioneer Project, wrote about its Issei pioneers, and later becoming a key member of the editorial team that put together the book, "NCRR: The Grassroots Struggle for Japanese American Redress and Reparations".