From: Helen Zia, Asian American Dreams (2000).

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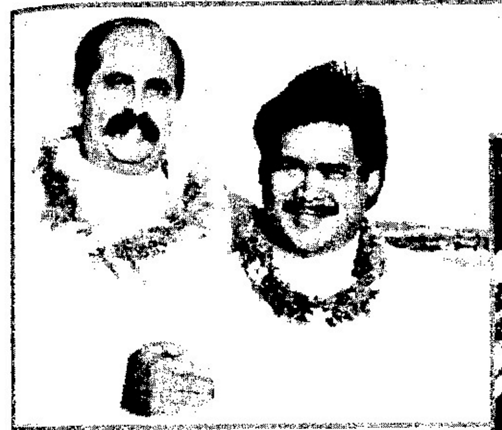
Out on the Front Lines



It was difficult for my parents to accept that I quit medical school to become a community organizer. I could hardly explain it myself, but I finally concluded that medicine was not right for me. The hardest part of my decision was letting

The couples who sued the state of Hawaii for the right to marry: (clockwise) Joseph Melillo and Patrick Lagon; Genora Dancel and Nina Baehr; Antoinette Pregil and Tammy Rodrigues (Tania Jo Ingraham and Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund)

my parents down. My mom said softly, "I hoped you would take care of me when I got old." My father stopped speaking to me for a time, which spared me from having to break the additional news that I was working as a construction laborer in the South End of Boston, at a site only a few blocks from my apartment.

In my new life, I was part of a fellowship of Asian American, black, and Latino community and labor organizers working to integrate the highly paid construction trades, a tight fraternity long open only to white men. We saw ourselves as sisters and brothers on a journey toward a noble goal. Beyond the idealism, there was another upside: paid at union scale, I made ten times more as a laborer than I had as a highly trained medical student. I could finally send some money home to my family, allowing me to make a small contribution toward my filial obligations.

Construction work and union organizing were male-dominated arenas, as was medicine. The dynamics reinforced my belief that women should not have to wait in line for our liberation, no matter what Confucius or my Americanized cohorts said. I became deeply involved in Boston's burgeoning women's movement. Hundreds of women came to each meeting we organized that linked women's lives with freedom struggles everywhere. I found a community of sisters, some of whom were openly lesbian. As I learned from the widely diverse range of women about their paths to self-awareness, I began to explore feelings that I'd had for a long time, that I was a lesbian.

Soon I was invited to a special meeting by my fellow Asian American and black community activists. When I arrived at the meeting, I was seated at one side of the room, and my friends sat in a semicircle facing me. It slowly dawned on me that I was the subject of the meeting.

Tariq, a soft-spoken African American man who lead a collective of activists in the Roxbury neighborhood of Boston, started the discussion. "Helen, we've noticed that you're spending a lot of time with lesbians. We need to know if you're a lesbian, because you would harm our organizing efforts. We would have to break off ties with you and the other Asian Americans." It seemed wrong that my sexual orientation would reflect badly on everyone who looked like me, but my Asian American friends nodded in agreement. The leader of our Asian American group hastened to reassure Tariq. "Homosexuality is not part of our community," he said. "It's a symptom of white, middle-class self-indulgence. We could not have a lesbian working with us." The meeting became more like a trial as they amassed the charges and the evidence. Together, they asked how I would plead. "So tell us, Helen, are you a lesbian?"

I couldn't believe my ears. These friends, my extended family, were asking

me to choose between my Asian American self and another intrinsic part of me. Feeling their stares as they awaited my response, I felt unsure. I hadn't acted on my impulses. Was I really a lesbian? I didn't know the answer, but I was certain of one thing. My Chinese upbringing taught me to value my family above all. Suddenly my extended family, my community, was threatening to disown me. Was I a lesbian? I answered, "No, I'm not."

Tariq and the others were relieved not to lose one of their energetic young organizers. The meeting was over and everyone went on to business as usual. Except for me. I had stepped into the closet and slammed the door shut. Rather than face my lesbian friends, I gradually stopped going to the women's gatherings. When friends in Detroit suggested I move there to discover America's heartland, I jumped at the chance.

In Detroit, what I found seemed to fill the void. As an autoworker at Chrysler, I experienced the essential humanity of people, across differences of race, culture, and class. I discovered my voice and my calling as a journalist. I embraced a vibrant Asian American community that went far beyond my fellowship of well-meaning activists. My work on the Vincent Chin case cemented a deep relationship with my extended family of Asian Americans. Even my mother and father were proud of me—my shortcomings as a daughter and medical school dropout were forgotten.

Yet something wasn't right with me. I was still searching for a way to make my whole self welcome in my community of Asian Americans. After nearly a decade in Detroit, I moved back east to New York—to pursue my career as a magazine editor, to be closer to my family, and to find the person I had run away from.

There was no lack of Asian American activity in the New York I returned to. While I had been stamping out car parts and writing about the local Detroit scene, bustling communities of South Asians, Koreans, and Filipinos had sprung up. There seemed to be more new Vietnamese restaurants in Chinatown than Chinese. Hate crimes against Asian Americans were on the rise, as were boycotts of Korean American markets. I became part of a support network of Asian American women activists; I joined a growing effort to fight domestic violence in the Asian American community by volunteering with the New York Asian Women's Center. An exciting organization of Asian American journalists was starting in New York. My own career flourished—I was the editor in chief of a travel magazine, and later the executive editor of *Ms.* magazine.

In another, separate part of my life, I had met someone to make a home with—and she was a woman. I came out as a lesbian. My life was full and happy,

but it took on that strange bifurcation that many gay people experience. I was an Asian American and I was a lesbian, but in those days I couldn't be both in the same space. It was easy to maintain a façade in a world that presumed all Asian Americans to be heterosexual, and all gays to be white and generally male. Yet my commitment as a journalist and activist was to bring forward communities struggling for visibility. The contradiction grew increasingly intolerable.

When I came out to my family, they were loving and supportive, glad that I found happiness in a home life of my own. Mom talked about gays in old Shanghai and encouraged me to raise a family anyway. Auntie Betty in Queens continued trying to match me with Mr. Right. "So what if you're gay? You can still find a man," she said with a shrug. The remaining challenge was to come out to an Asian American community whose kinship meant so much, when memories of my lesbian trial and the threat of ostracism were still fresh.

An opportunity arose when I was to deliver a speech on Asian Americans and the media to the annual convention of the Asian American Journalists Association in 1992. It was a time when anti-gay campaigns were under way across the country, and Asian Americans seemed irrelevant to the national debate. I wanted to acknowledge that Asian Americans had a stake in the issue, but try as I might, I couldn't work sexual orientation into my short speech. So I asked Hayley, the emcee and a friend, to add this minor detail to her introduction. Fine, no problem, she said. As Hayley addressed the national gathering of journalists and the live C-SPAN cameras, she said, "Helen is a longtime journalist, a feminist and . . ." She hesitated, stammering. "And she's a l-l-l-lesbian . . ." She paused to adjust the microphone and asked, "Did you all hear that? She's a l-l-l-lesbian . . ."

My fear of losing my ties to the Asian American community never materialized. Rather, I discovered a new sense of freedom with my colleagues and my work. In a small way, my televised coming out was a statement that Asian Americans are everywhere in American life and belong in every aspect of national discourse. It was hardly a novel idea, but its time had come.

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On the third floor of Honolulu's Richards Street YWCA in the late spring of 1993, a select group of Hawaii's leading Asian American advocates engaged in rapt conversation. Their meeting room overlooked the stately Iolani Palace. One hundred years earlier, Queen Liliuokalani, Hawaii's last reigning monarch, resided at the palace and was preparing to issue a new constitution for the Hawaiian nation before her government was overthrown by Americans.

Weighing constitutional matters of another sort, the two dozen board members of the Japanese American Citizens League's Hawaii chapter were next door at the Y discussing the Hawaii State Supreme Court's May 1993 ruling that people of the same sex have the right to be married. A historic discrimination lawsuit had been filed in Hawaii two years earlier, seeking equal protection for gay men and lesbians under the Hawaii state constitution, which included the right to state-sanctioned, civil marriage. The Hawaii chapter's national board representative, Bill Kaneko, proposed that JACL support the lawsuit.

Why should we Asian Americans get involved in a controversy over gay rights or other issues that have nothing to do with us? asked one of the board members. He also noted that no other non-gay civil rights group was anxious to speak up on the issue, and even the gay and lesbian groups seemed ambivalent. Would the JACL board be representing its Japanese American membership, which they presumed to be mostly heterosexual, by taking such a position on gay marriage? Another board member said same-sex marriage and homosexuality were moral issues, not political ones, and supporting them would run counter to many members' religious beliefs, including his own.

Kaneko, a Sansei—third-generation Japanese American—stated his case. "When Japanese Americans were stripped of our constitutional rights and shipped like cattle to American concentration camps, few other Americans protested the injustice," he said. "If we stand by and watch in silence when another group is denied equal rights, we become no different from the people who watched Japanese Americans get sent away."

The Hawaii chapter of the JACL was in the forefront on many of the national group's civil rights stands. Earlier in 1993, the chapter came out in support of Native Hawaiian self-determination and persuaded the national board to do the same. The stand not only brought recognition from many Pacific Islanders but garnered an invitation to speak at the centennial of the overthrow of the Hawaiian nation—and JACL was the only non–Native Hawaiian group so honored. Arguing for a similar stance in support of same-sex marriage, the chapter president, Sansei Allicyn Hikida Tasaka, cited JACL's civil rights history.

With 24,000 members and more than one hundred chapters across the

country, the Japanese American Citizens League was the largest civil rights group in the Asian American community. Founded in 1929, it was formed to encourage the political participation of American-born Japanese; later, it began to address racism and legalized discrimination against Japanese Americans. After the World War II internment, JACL began to take up social justice issues beyond its own community, especially those affecting other Asian Americans. In 1988, when Japanese Americans finally won a presidential apology and an act of Congress providing redress for the internment, community activists hoped to keep the civil rights momentum going. A new generation of leaders, the Sansei—like Kaneko, Tasaka, and many others—attempted to persuade an older and often more conservative JACL leadership to assert a bolder Asian American voice on national public policy concerns.

On the day that the chapter was to vote on same-sex marriage, board members listened closely to the recommendations of the issues committee, which had studied the Supreme Court's decision. My brother Hoyt Zia, an attorney who chaired the issues committee, showed how the arguments against same-sex marriage paralleled those made against interracial marriage. As late as 1967, miscegenation was still outlawed in sixteen states, until such laws were finally struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court that year. When the JACL board counted their votes, all but two directors supported the lawsuit for same-sex marriage. One of two dissenters immediately resigned from the board, citing a conflict with his religious convictions.

The other board members felt certain that the civil rights group must stand on its principles, no matter how controversial or seemingly distant from their ethnic membership base. With their vote, the Hawaii JACL members set in motion a process that would propel Asian Americans to the front lines of a national controversy—and threaten to split its own membership.

In the months following the Hawaii chapter's endorsement of same-sex marriage, Bill Kaneko, as JACL's national vice president for public affairs, brought the Hawaii chapter resolution in support of same-sex marriage to the national organization. He found enthusiastic allies among other chapters, national board members, and the staff of the national headquarters. There was a hopeful spirit for positive change in the sixty-four-year-old JACL, led by its first woman president, Lillian Kimura. Like Kaneko, the majority of the national board were Sansei and born in the baby boomer years.

After months of debate at the national board level, in May 1994 the national board of directors approved Kaneko's resolution to support same-sex marriage, 10 votes to 3, with 2 abstentions. The Japanese American Citizens League became the first non-gay national civil rights organization to support same-sex marriage.

The next day JACL's legal counsel to the national organization resigned, citing conflict with his religious views. The attorney was duly replaced, but a dissenting chapter called for the issue to be discussed at the national convention. Kaneko and the Hawaii chapter knew that they were going to have to fight an uphill battle.

As the debate took its tumultuous path through JACL, other Asian American groups watched closely, wondering how far an Asian American constituency was willing to move beyond obvious self-interest—and whether the strain of controversy might lead to a fracture. For the first time, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders would lead the nation with a strong, clear stand on an unpopular and divisive issue.

Initial discussions in the Hawaii JACL chapter arguing for the same-sex marriage suit came a few months after the unprecedented ruling by the Hawaii State Supreme Court in May 1993. In its decision, the high court determined that the state discriminated by denying marriage licenses to gay and lesbian couples. The court said that state law was violated by denying "same-sex couples access to the marital status and its concomitant rights and benefits." The Hawaii court also relied on a 1967 U.S. Supreme Court case that said marriage is a civil right. The Hawaii court ordered that same-gender marriages must be allowed unless there was a "compelling state interest" against such unions, one of the toughest legal tests for a state to prove, generally involving evidence that public safety is at stake.

The Hawaii court's ruling was an unexpected shock that made news across the nation. "Ruling by Hawaii's Supreme Court Opens the Way to Gay Marriages" was the headline in *The Washington Post* on May 7, 1993. Two of the supreme court justices were Asian American: Chief Justice Ronald T.Y. Moon concurred with the opinion, while Justice Walter Heen dissented. The potential consequences of the decision were staggering. If the state of Hawaii allowed marriages to take place between lesbians and gay men, other states with less expansive constitutions might be forced to recognize the unions. The entire bodies of law, from family law and tax code to employment rights and estate law, could be thrown into disarray.

On the mainland United States, Hawaii is best known as the island paradise of idyllic beach vacations. Though the territory joined the United States in 1959, even today some confused mainlanders think of Hawaii as a foreign country rather than as the fiftieth star on the Stars and Stripes. But those familiar with the state are not surprised that the case for same-sex marriage took root there.

First, there is a consciousness for equality in Hawaii that was forged in peoples who had experienced being colonized and used as chattel plantation labor. In 1778, when English Captain James Cook first sailed into Waimea Bay on the island of Kauai, an estimated 400,000 Native Hawaiians populated the islands. But the islanders had no immunity against venereal disease, smallpox, and other deadly ills introduced by Europeans and Americans. Nor were the Hawaiians immune to the rapacity of Anglos for their land and natural resources. By the 1880s, fewer than 40,000 Native Hawaiians survived. 80 percent of the land was under the ownership of Anglo missionaries, and most Hawaiians were landless in their own land.

The high death rate and declining labor pool among the native people forced enterprising Yankee sugar plantation owners to import indentured laborers from Asia, Puerto Rico, and Europe. They created a systematic race-based hierarchy, with white Anglo-Saxon Protestants at the top, Portuguese overseers in the middle, and various Asian ethnicities—mainly Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Filipino—vying with poor Hawaiians for room at the bottom. Asian laborers were commodities on purchase manifests that ordered "Fertilizer, Filipinos" and "Laborers, Mules & Horses." Within a few decades, Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino plantation workers and their descendants dominated the population.

Racial divisions were also exploited during World War II against the Japanese Americans in Hawaii. As the state's largest ethnic population, they were too crucial to Hawaii's economy to evacuate and imprison—though that possibility was entertained. Instead, Japanese Americans were restricted in their movements, removed from potentially sensitive jobs, and socially stigmatized. Like Asian Americans on the West Coast, people of other Asian ethnicities in Hawaii wore buttons saying "I'm Not Japanese."

Second, the desire to correct the inequalities that Hawaii's citizens had experienced became incorporated into the law. Over time, a vigorous labor movement in Hawaii challenged the racial hierarchy. As the descendants of Asian plantation workers and Native Hawaiians came to political power,

the Hawaii state constitution evolved as a reflection of their strong commitment to equality. These experiences of living in a colonized condition, subjected to overt inequality and racism, drove the Asian American children of those plantation workers to become staunch supporters of equal rights for all. In 1972, Hawaii became one of the first states in the country to support a constitutional amendment guaranteeing equal rights for women. Hawaii's voters adopted the Equal Rights Amendment by a 6-to-1 margin to ensure that equal rights under the law would not be denied on account of sex. U.S. Representative Patsy Mink, a Japanese American and the first woman of color to be elected to the House of Representatives, was a co-sponsor of that amendment.

The mainly Asian and Pacific Islander American voters of Hawaii not only ratified the federal Equal Rights Amendment but decided to incorporate this and other equality concerns directly into their state constitution, which became more inclusive in its equal rights protections than the U.S. Constitution. Whereas the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution states that no person shall be denied the equal protection of the laws, in 1993 the Hawaii state constitution incorporated the additional provision that "No person shall . . . be denied the enjoyment of . . . civil rights or be discriminated against in the exercise thereof because of race, religion, sex or ancestry."

In 1993, after three local lesbian and gay couples sued for the right to marry, the Hawaii Supreme Court noted that same-sex marriage fell under the equal protection of the law, unless a "compelling state interest" proved otherwise: "By its plain language, the Hawaii Constitution prohibits state-sanctioned discrimination against any person in the exercise of his or her civil rights on the basis of sex." In its decision, the Hawaii court analyzed the U.S. Supreme Court's 1967 ruling against state laws that prohibited interracial marriages in the case of *Loving* v. *Virginia*.

When Mildred Jeter and Richard Loving—a black woman and a white man—were married in Washington, D.C., in 1958 and returned home to Virginia, they were promptly arrested and convicted of violating the state's miscegenation laws banning interracial marriage. In his sentencing decision, the trial judge wrote that Divine Providence had not intended that marriage extend to interracial unions: "Almighty God created the races white, black, yellow, malay and red, and he placed them on separate continents. And but for the interference with his arrangement there would be

no cause for such marriages. The fact that he separated the races shows that he did not intend for the races to mix."

The court's arguments linking same-sex marriage to *Loving v. Virginia*, which tore down the legal bars to interracial marriage, was certain to strike a sympathetic local chord in Hawaii, where more than a third of state's population claims a mixed ethnic and racial heritage. Nearly everyone in Hawaii has relatives of another race. Among Native Hawaiians, interracial marriages are so common it is believed that no full-blooded Hawaiians will exist within another generation. Hawaii's more accepting attitudes toward people of different races has been a major factor in the high intermarriage rate. It remained to be seen, however, whether such attitudes, rooted in the shared history and commitment to equality held by the diverse Asian American and Pacific Islander peoples of Hawaii, would extend to gay and lesbian marriage.

Given the historical context, it was fitting for the court case advancing gay and lesbian marriage to break through in Hawaii, but it was quite another matter for an Asian American group to take up the banner. By anyone's standards, same-sex marriage was not typically associated with Asian Americans.

Until recent years, being visible and out front on public issues has been atypical for Asian Americans. Historically, there were numerous legal and social barriers that inhibited an Asian American voice. For much of the twentieth century, immigrants from Asia couldn't become U.S. citizens and they were thus denied the vote; Chinese in California were legally barred from testifying in court on their own behalf. Such a limited voice could only lower expectations of fair representation in the public record and in the news. Asian American advocates had to overcome resistance to the idea that Asian Americans might have something to contribute to the struggle against hate crimes, to race relations, to civil rights, and to other matters of national concern.

This chronic condition had a two-pronged impact: for Asian Americans, it verified that their voices were neither expected nor desired; for others, it confirmed that Asians are a silent, insular minority with nothing to say.

Internalizing their invisibility, Asian Americans sometimes enforced a self-imposed silence, in a sense "closeting" the community, especially when

issues are tinged with a perception of shame or stigma. For years, Asian women activists around the United States struggled to ignite a broad community response to issues of domestic violence and sexual assault. A handful of shelters and programs addressing the needs of Asian battered women were established in the 1980s in major cities, among them New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. Their progress was hindered by the lack of support from Asian American male leaders who saw such issues as "dirty laundry" that shouldn't be aired in public.

Occasionally, race and ethnicity have been used to squelch the airing of such "negative" issues in the Asian American community. For example, Dong Lu Chen, a Chinese American in New York, killed his wife in 1987 by pounding her head with a claw hammer. Chen, who suspected his wife was having an affair, claimed that violence against women was the norm in Chinese culture under such circumstances. The judge accepted his argument and sentenced Chen to five years' probation, the lightest sentence possible, saying that Chen "was driven to violence by traditional Chinese values about adultery and loss of manhood." The case outraged Asian American women, triggering protest demonstrations and considerable debate on the validity of "cultural defense" arguments. Asian American men, however, offered little comment.

The absence of an Asian American community outcry against domestic violence and other "dirty laundry" had the paradoxic effect of reinforcing the Asian Americans' general invisibility. Asian American social service advocates, for example, constantly battle the stereotype that Asian Americans have no problems requiring public assistance or attention, that they take care of their own.

Even well-established causes such as combating hate crimes become distasteful to a cautious Asian American community when there is a whiff of shame or stigma. In 1993, around the time that the Hawaii JACL chapter was debating same-sex marriage, Vietnamese American Loc Minh Truong was attacked by a group of teenage boys near a gay bar in Laguna Beach, California. Fifty-five-year-old Truong, a former refugee, was so badly beaten that authorities could not initially determine his race. His left eye came out of its socket and his skull was impaled by a rock. Truong was in critical condition for several days; police described the attack as one blow short of murder.

Such an egregious hate crime would normally rally support from

Asian Americans nationwide. But not this case. Truong's attackers were apprehended and pleaded guilty to attempted murder, felonious aggravated assault, and committing a hate crime. They admitted to saying to Truong, "You fucking faggot . . . we're going to get you!" and claimed that race was not a factor in the beating. Gay and lesbian activists, together with leaders from Asian American communities, rushed to Truong's support. As his family and the local Vietnamese community dealt with the shock of the attack, they also expressed their fears. The family asserted that Truong was not gay and did not want his name to be associated with gays.

The denials diminished the community's ability to condemn homophobic violence as well as anti-Asian hate crimes, regardless of Truong's sexual orientation. An opportunity for Asian Americans to be visible, to reach out and show a broader range of concerns, was lost.

The dry mountain air in Salt Lake City crackled with energy as more than eight hundred JACL members from across the United States assembled at the group's national convention. The publicized agenda of the August 1994 biennium included the showdown over the same-sex marriage issue. A heated floor debate was anticipated.

Asian immigrant communities have often been slow to adopt democratic procedures, particularly when the members come from countries with totalitarian dictatorships. The more Americanized Nisei second generation adopted a democratic and Western style of governance, founding JACL to promote American citizenship.

By 1994, generational divisions over JACL's direction became evident, following the conclusion in 1988 of the campaign for redress and an apology for the internment. Many Sansei who had worked on the redress campaign wanted to continue the momentum. "Among the Sansei, there was a definite feeling that, post redress, JACL should stay in the civil rights arena," said Carole Hayashino, a Sansei and the organization's associate director for more than ten years. "We made a lot of friends in the civil rights coalition through redress. We wanted JACL to be more of a cutting-edge organization."

Only blocks away from the convention, the towering presence of the Mormon Temple, spiritual center of the staunchly anti-gay Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, was more than symbolic. The Utah chapter, some of whose members were Mormons, was leading the efforts to oppose JACL's support for same-sex marriage. The Salt Lake City JACL chapter, which was also hosting the national convention, submitted a proposal to be voted on at the national convention to rescind the national board's decision to support same-sex marriage. As an alternative, it urged JACL not to take a position on the issue.

The Sansei advocates for same-sex marriage knew the battle would be uphill. "We didn't expect to win," said Carole Hayashino. "We considered withdrawing the resolution when it looked like we couldn't gather the necessary votes. But we decided that it was important to air a full discussion of the principles behind support for same-sex marriage."

On Saturday, August 6, discussion of the resolution began. Reid Tateoka, of the Mount Olympus Salt Lake City chapter, introduced the motion to rescind JACL's support of same-sex marriage. "This issue and the position of JACL at present compromises members' religious freedom and religious beliefs," said Tateoka. Other Utah chapter members appealed for neutrality, fearing that divisiveness over same-sex marriage would fracture JACL or inflict further damage upon the organization's precarious financial condition.

In an emotional exchange that previewed the debate over same-sex marriage that would later envelop other states, JACL delegates expressed their concerns for and against the resolution. The advocates for the Hawaii position were well prepared for a controversial floor debate, with key speakers from around the country ready to give their three-minute testimony to the delegates. Bill Kaneko set the tone, pointing out that this issue was about government-sanctioned civil marriage, not religious recognition or freedom. "What we have here is a community that needs our assistance. Fifty years ago if people supported us we may not have been in the camps. Let's open our hearts and remind ourselves that we too are minorities."

Larry Grant, of the Salt Lake City chapter, articulated the concerns of many who opposed same-sex marriage. "Marriage is a right granted by the states of the United States of America that has its origin in religious practices, and the marriage covenant is not only a vow of fidelity between two people but is also an obligation to raise a family and to help society. I don't believe supporting same-sex marriages can accomplish that."

In contrast, septuagenarian Nisei Chizu Iiyama, a longtime JACL member of Northern California's Contra Costa chapter, applauded the Hawaii chapter for bringing the issue into the open. "Morality has often been used

to hide underlying prejudices—my mother was one of the people who came to the United States as a picture bride, and they were accused of being immoral," she said, referring to the thousands of Japanese women whose initial match with husbands in the United States was via photograph.

A number of gay and lesbian JACL members came to Salt Lake City for the purpose of coming out to the crowded assembly, some for the first time. Tak Yamamoto, who had served as president of the San Fernando Valley chapter in Southern California, spoke of his desire to receive the benefits of marriage with his partner of twenty-seven years. "I am not asking for special rights, I'm asking for equal rights," he said. JACL's former national program director, Lia Shigemura, said, "It's very un-Japanese of me to come out and draw attention to myself as a lesbian. But I am doing so because many of you might believe that issues of lesbians and gays are not real Japanese American issues, because when we come out we are often forced to leave groups like JACL, our communities, and even our families."

In the assembly hall, the buzz of anticipation reached a peak when the chair recognized U.S. Representative Norman Mineta. Mineta, who was the first Japanese American to be elected mayor of a major American city, San Jose, was much beloved for his leadership in the decades-long battle in Congress to garner an official apology and redress for the imprisonment of 120,000 Americans of Japanese descent during World War II. As he stood at the microphone, the congressman did not mince his words. "I cannot think of any more dangerous precedent for this organization than to take a position on an issue of principle that is based on how it will directly affect those of Japanese ancestry," he said, naming groups such as the NAACP, the National Council of La Raza, the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force that had supported redress for Japanese Americans.

A hush fell on the room as Mineta shared a little-known anecdote about the uphill battle to pass redress in Congress. "For all the support that we generated outside the Congress, redress did not begin moving until 1987." Up until then, Mineta said, the legislation stalled in the House Administrative Law Subcommittee because of its chair, Representative Sam Hall, Jr., of Texas. But in 1987, Representative Barney Frank of Massachusetts was elected subcommittee chair. When Mineta went to congratulate him, Frank replied, "Norm, my top priority is to get redress moving."

"Now, here's an openly gay member of Congress with only a very, very

small Japanese American constituency," Mineta told the JACL delegates. "What did he do? He made redress his top priority. Why? Because he saw our civil rights as an issue of fundamental principle for this great country. Doing what is right is often controversial. Doing what is just is often unpopular. But if we are to remain a viable voice in the national civil rights movement we cannot back away from our commitments simply because the issue is difficult."

What had appeared to be an uncertain vote turned on Mineta's words. When the resolution was called, the vote was 50 to 38 against rescinding support for same-sex marriage, with 11 abstentions and 4 split votes. The Japanese American Citizens League reaffirmed its support of the same-sex marriage issue in Hawaii.

Cheers of stunned joy filled the room as Japanese Americans exchanged teary-eyed hugs. Members of the Hawaii chapter crossed the aisle to stand with the Salt Lake City chapter, urging a reconciliation within the organization. The JACL national council then moved on to other business, but the convention was transformed by the knowledge that the JACL's action held national import. The Sansei activists had won on the principle of standing up for the equal rights of what was perceived to be the concern of another community. By their stand, they won on another principle: that every American has a right to speak out on any issue, without needing to be asked or invited, because every issue has implications beyond immediate self-interest.

News of the vote quickly spread to other Asian American advocacy groups, whose leaderships wondered if they, too, would be forced to take on gay rights, still seen as unrelated to Asian American communities. Only a few months earlier, in February 1994, Chinese American gays and lesbians in San Francisco insisted on marching as a contingent in the city's internationally televised Chinese Lunar New Year Parade. Unlike New York's St. Patrick's Day Parade, whose Irish American organizers refused to allow Irish gays and lesbians to march, the Chinese American festivities proceeded without public incident.

The JACL position offered a new kind of Asian American attitude that confounded the old threshold. But except for the most politically aware Asian Americans, there was little consciousness of what transpired in Salt Lake City. The majority of Asian Americans, like everyone else, depended on mainstream news media for information. A few newspapers in cities

such as San Francisco covered the unprecedented vote. Not surprisingly, reports of JACL's stand failed to inspire the curiosity that a similar stand by other racial and ethnic groups might have. Even in the gay and lesbian press, the remarkable victory for same-sex marriage appeared only as a small item in some newsletters. Missing was any attempt to convey the content and character of the issues Asian Americans wanted to bridge.

Asian American lesbians and gays, however, were ebullient. To receive recognition and validation from one of the oldest and largest Asian American organizations was more than they had hoped for. Within JACL, new memberships grew among younger Sansei Japanese Americans, including lesbians and gays. May Yamamoto, an active member of JACL's Los Angeles chapter who came out as a lesbian during the debate, became president of her chapter. Beyond JACL, a greater confidence in coming out and participating in Asian American community activities emerged among individuals as well as Asian lesbian and gay organizations.

The openness of JACL to lesbians and gays had an energizing effect on international same-sex networks. Globally, Asian gay and lesbian communities sparked with the knowledge that a national Asian American organization supported gay rights. Women from nearly every country in Asia organized their first international Asian lesbian conference. In Taiwan, a thriving gay and lesbian culture began to blossom, and even in the totalitarian People's Republic of China an underground movement of gays and lesbians was emerging. JACL's support of same-sex marriage didn't cause these international events to happen, but its message of Asian American community acceptance of its gay sons and lesbian daughters was one of hope to Asians around the world: that the extended family, the community, could accept them.

In Hawaii, the Salt Lake City vote gave a boost to the same-sex marriage effort, which was still being decided in the courts. Opponents of the lawsuit were gathering arguments to prove the necessity for the Hawaii state government to keep marriage for heterosexuals only. Soon ads began appearing in the daily newspapers, condemning homosexuality as immoral. For the five years between the Supreme Court ruling and the statewide election in 1998, Hawaii residents were treated to daily messages in newspaper display ads such as "Homosexuality surpasses all other vices in enormity," "Homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered," and "The goal of the promoters of moral aberration: destruction of the family." Several large church organizations, particularly the Mormons and Catholics, actively voiced their opposition to same-sex marriage in the heavily Christian state.

Mainland-identified gay groups such as the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund came to the assistance of the local Hawaii lesbian and gay couples who were plaintiffs in the marriage suit; Lambda was instrumental in mobilizing national support for the lawsuit. When the issue moved from the courts and into the political arena, the Human Rights Campaign Fund, a national gay and lesbian civil rights group, stepped in. But other mainlanders took an interest as well. Randall Terry, founder of the anti-abortion group Operation Rescue, decided to set up shop in Hawaii against same-sex marriage.

Coverage of the lawsuit in the mainstream media and in the gay and lesbian press glossed over the locus of the debate, Hawaii. The islands became a colorful and inconsequential detail, a footnote.

The growing controversy had its most direct impact on the sizable population of local lesbians and gay men in Hawaii. Five out of the six plaintiffs for same-sex marriage were born and raised on the islands, but in the close-knit island community it is particularly hard to be openly gay. Locals in Hawaii joke that they can divine someone's entire family history and background simply by knowing his or her high school and graduating class. When everyone can potentially know everything about your family within one degree of separation, coming out can threaten the equilibrium within one's entire extended family.

Even without the vocal outcry against same-sex marriage, many local gays and lesbians remain closeted or leave Hawaii's closeness for the mainland, rather than risk bringing unwanted attention to their family members. But the largely negative spotlight on homosexuality brought a disconcerting attention to the unacknowledged local gays, provoking even greater fear and secrecy in many. Their absence from the same-sex marriage debate helped perpetuate the impression that there are no local gay men or lesbians in the state.

In Hawaii, with the influence of its majority of Asian and Pacific Islander American communities, the family takes on a far more dominant role than in many other American cultures. The irony for local gays and lesbians is that their respect for the institution of the family is what motivated three local couples to sue for acknowledgment of their relationships

through civil marriage. Similarly, the importance of family to Asian and Pacific Islanders played a large role in moving a "straight" organization like the Hawaii chapter of JACL to insist on the rights of all people to make a family. Yet, at the same time, concern for the extended family forced local lesbians and gays deeper into the closet at a time when their own right to create a family was at issue.

For Native Hawaiians, who were fighting a hundred-year-long battle for their sovereignty, the same-sex marriage debate had a very different context. It was difficult for Native Hawaiians to rally behind the marriage question, especially when studies predicted that tourism could increase by $4 billion a year if same-sex marriage were legal. The destructiveness of tourism development was a major factor in the loss of ancient sacred sites and the disruption of agricultural land and water. Anti-gay groups injected a homophobic element into the tourism concerns by planting fears of the state being overrun by gay white men on their honeymoons.

Yet same-sex relationships were once an accepted part of Native Hawaiian culture, centuries before Hawaii had a constitution. "When men were away for long periods on voyages or for battle, they had same-gender relationships. So did the women at home together; it was something that was accepted," said Ku'umealoha Gomes, of Na Mamo O Hawai'i, a Native Hawaiian organization of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. "Is it any wonder that the missionaries were so threatened by us?" Extended families often included same-sex partners, and many of the ruling chiefs, including King Kamehameha, had male companions in their households. Legends of Pele, the creation goddess of Hawaii, ruler of fire and volcanoes, include tales of her female partner. It is said that some of the Hawaiian warriors who first greeted Captain Cook ashore asked his sailors to become their lovers. How the Europeans responded to the invitation is not known.

Missionaries, particularly Mormons, won many converts among Native Hawaiians, but a certain ambiguity remained. "In the Hawaiian community there is a distinction between sexuality versus marriage," said political consultant Norma Wong, who is Native Hawaiian. "A broad tolerance exists for other relationships and children born from those. There's no term for 'illegitimacy.' Marriage was a missionary thing, but family was something else, larger. This distinction has been a gray area in Hawaii for a long time, until this issue made it so black-and-white."

Because of their more expansive view of family, the same-sex marriage issue seemed irrelevant to many Native Hawaiians. Questions of Hawaiian sovereignty—the right to self-governance—over, and its impact upon, a host of issues, from ancient sacred lands to poverty and water rights, loomed as far more pressing. "If you were to ask the question in relation to our culture, it would not be 'What is traditional marriage?' but rather, 'What is property?' " said Kina'u Boyd Kamali'i, chairperson of Ho'omalu ma Kualoa, a Native Hawaiian unity initative. "To us, property is about *aina*—land—and giving the ceded lands back to the Hawaiian people. If you sell our lands, you will lose the Hawaiian people. If you lose the Hawaiians, you lose Hawaii. So when you talk about tradition and traditional marriage, you have to peel back the layers to what is traditional."

But the Native Hawaiian concerns over land and culture were soon linked with the same-sex issue. Hawaii Circuit Court Judge Kevin Chang ruled that the state, the Mormon Church, and others appealing the original court decision had failed to provide a convincing justification for the state to discriminate against lesbians and gays. On December 6, 1996, he ordered the state marriage bureau to begin issuing licenses. For a fleeting moment same-sex marriages were legal in Hawaii, but it was only an illusion. The state immediately appealed his decision. The next day Chang stayed his order, pending appeal. Though Judge Chang had rendered the courageous ruling that same-sex marriage was legal under Hawaii's constitution, he evidently did not want to be the one to allow the first gay marriage to take place.

Having lost in the courts, same-sex marriage opponents pressured the state legislature to allow a ballot initiative calling for a state constitutional convention to change Hawaii's state constitution. The possibility of changing the constitution sounded an alarm to Native Hawaiians. For years, land developers searched for ways to chip away at Native Hawaiian rights to water and land and to gather in sacred places. Before a developer could divert water for a golf course, for example, plans would have to account for Hawaiian rights—rights that are guaranteed by the state constitution. A constitutional convention to bar same-sex marriage could open up changes in Native Hawaiian rights. "Once the Constitution is open for change, there is a domino effect on other rights, the rights of Native Hawaiian people," said Ku'umealoha Gomes. "The same-sex issue is being used as a wedge to divide us; it will have a domino effect on other people's rights."

The fear wasn't imaginary. Developers joined with the same-sex marriage opponents to lobby for a constitutional convention. "There is a link

as to why developers jumped on the same-sex issue," said Eric Yamamoto, professor of law at the University of Hawaii. "A 'yes' to change the constitution on marriage could provide momentum for a constitutional convention vote and open up a reconsideration of Native Hawaiian rights. The link was a practical one."

By the spring of 1998, the Hawaii state legislature—under pressure from conservative and religious lobbies—authorized two special questions to be added to the November ballot: one an unprecedented proposal to grant the state legislature the power to amend the state constitution to restrict marriage to opposite-sex couples; the other proposing a constitutional convention to allow for revisions or amendments. In the previous election, the handful of legislators who publicly supported the Hawaii Supreme Court's ruling were targeted and lost their assembly seats. Few politicians were willing to stand in the way of the heterosexual-marriage forces.

The fight over same-sex marriage spilled from the courtroom into the communities. The battle for the hearts and minds of Hawaii's people promised to be challenging. A connection between gay and lesbian rights and the lives of a mainly Asian American and Pacific Islander electorate had yet to be built. Many locals equated "gay" with *haole*—Hawaiian for white. Gay relationships were *ugi*, pronounced "oo-gee"—a local term meaning "yucky." The widespread description of gay and lesbian relationships as *ugi* was a clear expression of homophobia. Putting a local, human face on the issue would be especially difficult when so many of the local gays and lesbians were closeted.

JACL, through its Hawaii chapter and national convention four years earlier, had pushed open the door. At 22 percent of the state's population, Japanese Americans made up the largest single Asian ethnic group. Filipinos and Pacific Islanders were each about 15 percent; Chinese, 6 percent; and Koreans, 2 percent. But in Hawaii's complex ethnic dynamics, what might resonate with one Asian group was unlikely to reach other Asian Americans. Native Hawaiians and Chinese Americans had found their place in Hawaii's early, Caucasian-dominated political scene. But since the 1950s, Japanese Americans had come into political prominence, a situation not without tensions with other Asian American immigrant groups, particularly Koreans and Filipinos.

With the backing of the national JACL at Salt Lake City, a substantial national network and resources were potentially available to help reach other Asian American ethnicities about the same-sex marriage issue. But the proponents of JACL's same-sex marriage proposal were unprepared for the backlash that followed the vote.

Even before the convention vote in Utah, there were rumblings of dissatisfaction toward the national board and staff for advancing the same-sex marriage issue. A secret strategy meeting took place two months before the convention. Key editors and board members of JACL's newspaper, the *Pacific Citizen*, held a brainstorming session to use the power of the press to "show membership that this leadership is lost and wayward" because of its "arrogant and inappropriate" position on same-sex marriage. Their plans, recounted in a confidential memo, included an election strategy to replace the national leadership. While the national board's Sansei majority had mobilized for the marriage vote, a more conservative, second-generation Nisei board was elected at the Salt Lake City convention, outnumbering the civil-rights-oriented Sansei leadership. The new president vowed to steer JACL away from its "treacherous path."

Though the majority of the new board now in control of JACL was opposed to the organization's same-sex marriage stance, they could not reverse a vote taken by the national council. Instead, the fury of the opposition was directed at the Sansei staff members of JACL's national office. At a closed board meeting in December 1994, four months after the August convention, the new president and majority announced that a projected budget deficit was forcing them to lay off five of the seven staff members. By March 1995, the five Sansei staff were terminated, and the remaining two resigned. One by one, the third-generation leadership resigned in protest from the JACL national board, excising the civil-rights-oriented generation from JACL's national leadership.

It was not the first time the Japanese American community faced serious rifts over deeply felt principles. Schisms during the Japanese American internment over whether and how to "prove" one's loyalty to the United States had terrible consequences for every family. Depending on how the internees answered the loyalty oath, some were sent to harsher internment facilities, others to federal penitentiaries or even deported. Young Japanese American men who enlisted in the war effort proved their loyalty with bravery that resulted in the highest casualty rates of any other fighting

units. More than fifty years after the war, anger and bitterness over this question still smolders.

The schism over same-sex marriage was markedly different. It was a principle that Japanese Americans chose to debate, not one that was thrust upon them. But other Asian American groups watched the JACL splintering with alarm. A new generation of leaders was advancing in organizations throughout the various Asian American communities. This younger generation hoped to extend the public policy interests and reach of Asian Americans. The bold move to support same-sex marriage not only pushed the envelope to its limits but punctured it. Now one of the leading—and one of the few—national Asian American voices was immobilized by the unexpected backlash. What could be characterized to a large extent as a generational showdown was a grim parable to other new generation leaders: the nail that sticks out might indeed be hammered down.

As the battle over same-sex marriage shifted to the electoral arena, local leaders stepped forward to organize the campaign against the constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriage. Heading the coalition called Protect Our Constitution was Jackie Eurn Hai Young, a third-generation Korean American former Hawaii state legislator, and the first woman to serve as vice speaker of the Hawaii House of Representatives. While she was vice speaker, a bill was introduced to define marriage for heterosexuals only—and Young voted against it. When she ran for office again in 1996, her opponent campaigned on the marriage issue, defeating Young by 187 votes and adding her to the roster of Hawaii politicians felled by their support for same-sex marriage. Because of her record, the Human Rights Campaign Fund approached her about assisting with the campaign.

Young enlisted the support of leaders in the local Asian American and Pacific Islander communities, including several past presidents and board members of the Hawaii JACL chapter, which was still free to support the issue, since, at least on paper, JACL supported same-sex marriage. JACL's endorsement opened the door to the politically influential Japanese American community. A Protect Our Constitution ad campaign featured an array of prominent Japanese American leaders who came out strongly in opposition to the "traditional marriage" amendment, including Bishop Yoshiaki Fujitani of the Buddhist Church; Jean Aoki, president of the League of Women Voters; Albert Miyasato, former deputy superintendent

of the Department of Education; and Major General (Ret.) Walter Tagawa. Their presence helped to broaden the local support. As individuals from the Native Hawaiian, Filipino, and Chinese communities came forth, so did the Hawaii chapter of the NAACP, and Wally Amos, creator of Famous Amos cookies. "The initials for Protect Our Constitution are POC, which coincidentally is an acronym for 'People of Color,' " said Ku'umealoha Gomes, who was openly lesbian and a coalition member. "It was important for us to put a local face on the campaign."

Al and Jane Nakatani, a well-known Japanese American couple from Maui who had lost two of their sons to AIDS, also joined the coalition's leadership. The Nakatanis were outspoken critics of homophobia, especially in the Asian American community. Despite the support that the Nakatanis and others gave to gays and lesbians and their right to marry, the coalition itself, unlike JACL, did not come out directly in support of same-sex marriage.

Those opposing same-sex marriage also presented a local face. The leadership of the Save Traditional Marriage coalition was local, presenting ads that portrayed two Asian-looking Ken dolls in wedding tuxedos. Another showed two Asian men rushing to embrace each other while leaving an Asian bride standing alone and dejected. They argued that common sense and morality dictate that marriage should remain between a man and a woman.

The Protect Our Constitution group appealed to the need to protect everyone's constitutional rights, calling on voters to defend the state constitution and Hawaii's aloha tradition of equality. "Never before have we amended Hawaii's constitution to specifically discriminate against one group of people," said Young. If that were to happen, POC suggested, the rights of all people would be threatened. What group would be next—women, workers, Native Hawaiians, other minorities, the elderly? An ad cited the Japanese American internment experience, showing an elderly man and two boys with numbered tags on their clothes, with a sign in the background saying "Japs keep out, you rats"; the ad's caption: "It must not happen again. To anyone ever."

Many Japanese Americans were moved by the link to internment. "When I heard the POC people talk about same-sex marriage and how it is intertwined with my cultural background and history, I felt both touched and empowered," said Terri Oshio, a third-generation Japanese

American who manages her family's banana farm on Oahu. "Talking about same-sex marriage in the context of discrimination, the internment, and constitutional rights gave me the courage to discuss gay issues with my parents." Oshio organized block parties and persuaded her parents' close-knit neighborhood to support the POC position.

More than a million dollars was spent by each camp on intensive media campaigns. The final vote tally ended where the initial opinion polls began: 70 percent of the voters were against same-sex marriage, 30 percent voted with those who supported same-sex marriages. The fear that the same-sex marriage vote would act as a wedge in the Native Hawaiian constitutional vote didn't materialize, as voters clearly distinguished between the two issues. In the end, the arguments in the Hawaii statewide debate were reduced to the same polarizing questions presented to the JACL national board and council—morality versus civil rights, as though the issue were one or the other. But the members of the JACL were a self-selected group, specifically concerned about protecting civil and constitutional rights, whereas the general populace of Hawaii was not. The appeal to prevent discrimination from happening to another group was not persuasive enough to extend to same-sex marriage. A consciousness formed out of the racial hierarchy of the plantations and the colonization of the islands could not overcome the influence of homophobia; not yet.

Hawaii's JACL members who had supported the same-sex marriage issue were disappointed. "I'm shocked and ashamed that this anti-gay bigotry is happening in Hawaii. What happened in the national JACL should have been a sign of how this debate would evolve," said Alan Murakami, an attorney with Native Hawaiian Legal Corporation and a board member with the Hawaii JACL chapter. "It's a sign that we have to do more to build bridges between the different cultures in Hawaii. What reached Japanese Americans didn't matter to other Asian Americans."

The evolution of the same-sex marriage issue in the Asian American and Pacific Islander communities held great significance for the nation on many levels. Culturally, the spotlight on Hawaii showed that the state's image as a cultural paradise and ethnic melting pot was flawed. In a report to President Clinton's Initative on Race Advisory Board, a Hawaii panel pointed out that, as other cities and states across the nation increasingly resemble Hawaii racially and ethnically, the Aloha State could be a harbinger for the rest of the country.

Politically, the evolution of the same-sex marriage issue in Hawaii offered lessons for the rest of the nation. "In Hawaii, same-sex marriage was a litmus-test issue for Democrats, the way abortion has been for Republicans," said William Hoshijo, executive director of the Hawaii Civil Rights Commission. "But Protect Our Constitution also showed that we could bring a wide range of forces together beyond Asian ethnic issues—labor, Native Hawaiians, civil rights advocates, clergy, professionals, civic groups. It's the most exciting coalition to come into being in Hawaii in a long time."

For Asian Americans, the debate was deeply symbolic. The protracted debate in Hawaii and in other Asian American communities brought the community's attitudes about gay and lesbian matters out in the open. Despite the defeat in a nasty and homophobic campaign, a remarkably visible group of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders supported the constitutional rights of lesbians and gays. And while the backlash in JACL scored a coup against the Sansei civil rights agenda, a significant majority of its chapters voted to support same-sex marriage as a civil rights issue.

"JACL was a catalyst for the Asian American community," said Colbert Matsumoto, an attorney and former president of the Hawaii JACL chapter. "Their action forced us to talk about our prejudices and to recognize how we look at people who we think are different from us. It also forced us to reconsider our common bonds." As the diverse Asian American communities search for ways to come together, they have also begun to question the prejudice that exists within and among our communities.

Most important, JACL's act of interjecting an Asian American voice into a seemingly peripheral national controversy was revolutionary. It marked the coming out of Asian Americans on a major issue, as a matter of principle rather than in reaction. Their stand was a expression of entitlement to participate in every part of the American dialogue. That the subject was same-sex marriage opened a new arena of engagement in society. Asian Americans passed another milestone as they develop the ability and strength to go beyond ethnic issues—and to be seen as full participants in this democracy.