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Touching, Timely Documentary Airs Thursday on PBS Hawai'i

An hourlong tour of the Japanese-American experience in Hawaii driven by the rhythm of taiko drums and the voices of Maui residents recalling the old plantation days will be televised Thursday on PBS Hawaii.

"Great Grandfather's Drum" was filmed by former Mauians Cal and Victoria Lewin in collaboration with Kahului resident Kay Fukumoto, whose great-grandfather and his Fukushima-taiko style provided the historical drum line for this documentary. It will show at 8:30 p.m. and 11 p.m. on Channels 10 and 11.

Since the premiere of the film in February, great-grandfather Tomijiro Watanabe's home prefecture in northern Honshu was devastated by a 9.0-magnitude earthquake and tsunami. Fukumoto, who still has family there, and the Lewins visited the prefecture in 2008, with portions of their visit appearing in the film.

Victoria Lewin said she wept when she learned of the destruction from the March quake and tsunami. The death toll has topped 14,000, and thousands remain missing.

"It was the most wonderful place," she said last week, adding that she and her husband had been planning to return next year. "People opened their arms. . . . They were so kind to us.

"It was losing something personal. It's been really hard."

Fukumoto's relatives, who live inland in the prefecture that stretches from the ocean to the mountains, were unhurt, and their homes withstood the temblor. But they were "stripped to the bare essentials," said Fukumoto. An aunty on her mother's side, who owns a hotel in the city with nearly 300,000 residents, was without water. Food was difficult to come by in the days after the disaster, and her cousin couldn't go to work because there was no gasoline.

The Dai-ichi Nuclear Power Station looms 30 miles away, she said. That's outside the evacuation zone set up by the Japanese government but inside the 50-mile zone recommended by U.S. officials.

Fukumoto sent email to her Japanese kin offering to put them up in Hawaii until things got better. She was rebuffed.

They told her that they have to support the "Fukushima 50," the 50 or so workers who stayed behind to try to save the nuclear power plant despite grave health risks to themselves.

" 'I was born and raised in Fukushima so I'm going to stay,' " they told Fukumoto. "They feel this loyalty to have to stay regardless of what the danger is to them."

With their personal ties to Fukushima, Fukumoto and the Lewins are using the film to raise funds for the victims. A film showing at Orange County Buddhist Church in California on April 3 drew nearly 300 people and raised \$15,000. On June 4, the Honolulu Fukushima Kenjin Kai is organizing a Fukushima prefecture relief effort with private screenings of the film.

This documentary project began five years ago and is a product of two parties at the right place at the right time and of similar minds. The Lewins, who lived on Maui at the time, had just finished the documentary "The World In A Box" about geographic information systems and were looking for another project.

Mrs. Lewin was a client of Fukumoto, who piqued the filmmaker's historical interest with stories of her mother, Amy Watanabe, being a "picture bride" and the Japanese immigrant experience. The filmmaker wanted to learn more.

"How did I live on Maui all these years, and I don't know the history of the Japanese," Fukumoto recalls Mrs. Lewin telling her.

So the filmmaker said she decided to make a documentary that would "be understandable to people who don't live in Hawaii, people who don't know taiko, obon." There are many on the island that are unaware of the story of the Japanese in Hawaii, she said.

Fukumoto had her eye on bringing awareness to another group of people.

"She was looking for a way to pass this history on to young people," said Mrs. Lewin.

Like her dad, Fukumoto had passed down her great-grandfather's love and skill for taiko to her son, Mitchell, currently a sophomore in college, in the traditional ways that included watching and listening, practicing and performing. But Fukumoto wanted to do more and employed modern media.

Film seemed better than the written word to get through to the current "visual generation," she said. Then, it came down to what she could teach Mitchell in an hour about the history of his Hawaii ethnic brothers and sisters.

"If you spend an hour with your children, what would we say," Fukumoto explained as she thought about the content of the film. "An hour is so precious."

Stories of the harsh days and the sacrifices made by the early immigrants to Hawaii as they laid the foundation for future generations resonated throughout the documentary. The stories and the people touched the soul of Fukumoto and others, and Mrs. Lewin with her comfortable and conversational interview style was able to capture those moments on film. Talk of "ancestral sacrifices" choked sentences and brought tears to normally composed Japanese-American leaders including Leonard Oka, founder of Maui Sons and Daughters of Nisei Veterans; Yuki Lei Sugimura, a publicist who is actively involved in Japanese cultural events; attorney Lynn Araki-Regan and Fukumoto.

The tears flow from "knowing that people had to go through pain and suffering in order for you to be where you are today, and the feeling of gratitude for all that they did," Fukumoto said. "I've always wanted to pass down that feeling of gratitude."

Ironically, while the sansei (third generation in Hawaii) and yonsei (fourth generation) choke up at talk of the sacrifices of those who came before them, the older generation that lived those difficult times remain resilient, observed Victoria Lewin, who interviewed nearly 50 Mauians for the documentary, including Masaru "Pundy" Yokouchi before he died, Hiroshi Arisumi, member of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team and a builder, and attorney Meyer Ueoka.

The documentary depicts the long and tiring hours in the field, strict lunas or supervisors, discrimination and low pay.

"What I was struck by was that no one seemed bitter," the filmmaker said of the interviews. "It was so emotionally affecting to me. People were so happy, unbitter."

They live by the Japanese philosophy "shikataganai," which roughly translates to "it can't be helped."

"That is such a wonderful way to live," she said.

Woven in between the big picture historical events in the film was the personal story of the Fukumoto family, who hailed from Keahua Camp, now lost in the cane fields below Haliimaile. The filmmakers used the Fukumoto story "to make history emotionally accessible to people . . . not just dates and people who are long gone," explained Cal Lewin.

"We create history as we live our lives" he added.

Fukumoto may have made history herself as the first female taiko performer. Sojin Kim, who was with the Japanese American National Museum at the time, made that observation while collecting Hawaii information for an exhibit years ago.

The Baldwin High School graduate picked up the stubby sticks of the Fukushima-style at age 10. Her father, Albert Watanabe, noticed that his daughter had "the beat" when she'd pick up the sticks and pound the drum during breaks of his taiko group's practices.

Most of the performers at the time were in their 40s and 50s, so the young Fukumoto stuck out. Youth had its rewards.

"When I was 10, people would come up to me and give me money" after performances, she said. "They thought it was cute, and they would hand me money."

She and her family formed Maui Taiko about 15 years ago to play at community and private events. They are fixtures at obon dances during the summer performing the popular "Fukushima Ondo," a song that speaks to friendships and the circle of life, said Fukumoto.

The beat has sped up to keep up with the times. In a portion of the documentary filmed in Fukumoto's ancestral home, elderly Fukushima residents - with the familiar "hunk'in short sticks" as Fukumoto describes them - sing and beat at a slow pace, making the song almost unrecognizable as the "Fukushima Ondo" that's played at Hawaii obons.

When Fukumoto began playing the tune decades ago, the beat was much slower than today. Young dancers would bolt from the ring when "Fukushima Ondo" was announced. Bringing the song up to speed has drawn the younger set back into the dancing ring.

"Continuing tradition in its purest form or wanting the tradition to continue, we've had to balance," said Fukumoto. "If we go too fast the older people leave now."

For the filmmakers who currently live in Seattle, this was a long "labor of love," which was done "off and on" for five years on a limited budget. There were grants from the county, Japanese Cultural Society, A&B Properties and other local businesses and individuals through the years but Fukumoto said, "the majority of the costs were donated by the Lewins, so this film is truly a gift from the Lewins."

"It was such a wonderful experience," said Victoria Lewin. "I got to do work I loved. . . . Life is a mixture of things. It really impacted my life.

"It is a story of acceptance and tolerance. . . . It made me think of my family. It affects people. It has been so affecting to people outside the culture.

"As we move into the new, it helps to be grounded in where we came from. It brings stability."

In addition to PBS Hawaii, "Great Grandfather's Drum" will be shown at free movie night at the Maui Matsuri, May 13, 6:30 p.m. in the Student Center, Pilina Building, University of Hawaii Maui College.

In Honolulu, the Japanese Cultural Center of Hawaii will put together a gallery exhibit about the film and will have regular screenings from May 14 to June 17.

Lee Imada can be reached at leeimada@mauinews.com.

Online: greatgrandfathersdrum.com

(Report Provided by [The Maui News](#))