



ISLAND MATTERS *Mufi Hannemann*

A Final Salute To Lt. Col. Mark Takai

My family, like so many others, is saddened by the passing of 49-year-old U.S. Rep. Mark Takai. He was as dedicated a public servant as I have seen in Hawaii in all the years I have been following the local political scene.

I have known "K. Mark," as I would call him from time to time since his years as a blue-chip scholar-athlete at University of Hawaii after a stellar high school career at Pearl City High School. He volunteered on my first venture for public office, and he and I and our families have been friends for three decades.

We both got elected to office for the first time in 1994 from basically the same area, and through the years our public and personal lives were intertwined. We co-hosted community projects, meetings and coffee hours, canvassed and sign-waved together, and participated in numerous school assemblies and functions in the Pearl City/Aiea/Waipahu district. When I was on the City Council, he submitted a regular wish list to me of parks to be cleaned, potholes to be patched, traffic-calming measures to be installed and the like. To slow him down, one day I asked him point blank in the local vernacular, "What, you like my job

as councilmember, too?" He paused momentarily, chuckled and sent over another list, and told me, "It's all about helping people ... besides, I'm trying to help you get re-elected to the Council."

Of course, when I became mayor the list expanded immensely with new ideas and causes. This time, it was individuals who warranted a mayoral proclamation or a day named in their honor, especially those affiliated with the military, UH education and athletics, and the public schools system. Whenever I would balk, he would give me that endearing look of his and remind me that he was a "staunch supporter of rail," and I would relent.

I believe that's one of the reasons Mark was good at his craft: He knew the right buttons to push with people and he was an excellent strategist in developing a winning game plan. He possessed an inquisitive mind, and we would spend countless hours talking about local, national and foreign issues that were top of mind. He constantly was bouncing ideas off others because he always was striving to improve and enhance our quality of life.

One of the best ideas he proffered was the need for Honolulu to pay tribute to our first

responders and victims from Hawaii who lost their lives as a result of the 9/11 tragedy in New York. He lobbied my administration passionately for such an event. It brought a huge smile on his face when I conveyed to him that Pili Pang, my then-director of the Mayor's Office of Culture and the Arts, was putting the finishing touches on a plan to unveil the Mayor's Remembrance Walk. Thanks in part to Mark, it has become an annual observance of the city every September.

He took great pride in his military service as a lieutenant colonel in the Hawaii National Guard, including a tour of the Middle East. He always was looking for ways for government to make lives better for our military personnel, veterans and their families. I recall an intimate conversation we had about him joining my administration at City Hall. I told him it would provide greater compensation for him and his growing family, and possibly even a shot at running for mayor one day. He said he couldn't do it because the two issues of greatest import to him, education and the military, were subjects outside of the city's jurisdiction that resided primarily at the state and national levels, and he harbored a lifetime commitment to fight for those

issues. Case closed.

In our personal lives we shared similar tastes. For instance, we both were huge Disney fanatics. We were in constant competition to see who would be the first to visit every Disney attraction in the world. I led for the longest time after touring every Disneyland — California, Florida, France, Japan and Hong Kong — before he did. But once he caught up, he then leapfrogged over me by taking Disney cruises, and he never let me forget it by proclaiming himself the Disney King.

When it came to obon season, I would needle him that there is no way a Polynesian should be more familiar and

know a greater variety of dances than a Japanese! We both loved music. As I crooned soft rock ballads, Mark reveled in the artistry of Prince and did a pretty good rendition (I have to admit) of *When Doves Cry*.

On a more serious note, when I started the Pacific Century Fellows (PCF) program, a two-decades-old program aimed at developing the next generation of leaders in Hawaii, Mark, as a young state official, chose to apply and was selected into the second class. He and other fellows during those early years of PCF in the late 1990s brought legitimacy to a leadership initiative that continues to flourish and grow today, with 15 classes of fellows represent-

ing all professions and from every island. As a proud alumnus, Mark was a huge supporter of the program and was responsible for recruiting several people to apply to be a PCF so that they could undergo the same rewarding experience he did.

To Sami, Matthew, Kaila, parents Naomi and Erik, and siblings: I speak for many who have had the privilege and pleasure of knowing K. Mark Takai when I say Mark's deeds, perseverance and faith will carry us and serve as an example that a lifetime of service to our fellow man and community is an honorable and noble endeavor.

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