

Richard Aoki (1938-2008): Toughest Oriental to Come Out of West Oakland

Harvey Dong

Longtime Asian American movement activist and Black Panther Party (BPP) founder, Richard Aoki passed away Sunday morning on March 15, 2009. The day before his passing, Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) strike veterans and students were celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the strike for Ethnic Studies at UC Berkeley. Activities included an Asian American Pacific Islander student conference and an Asian American alumni dinner—focused on the legacy of the Third World Strike of 1969. Although Richard was too ill to attend the dinner and other TWLF fortieth anniversary commemorative events, different speakers credited him for his past leadership contributions. Attendees at the Saturday dinner signed “get well” messages on an event poster that was brought over to Richard’s home. His body did not respond well to the previous week’s dialysis treatment. His heart had stopped and had to be revived by doctors. Exhausted from his stay in the hospital and not feeling improvement, he opted to return home to recover. Over the years, he had taken the route of going home for recovery from at least two strokes, except this time was different. The next morning, Richard was brought by ambulance to the hospital where he passed away.

A number of Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA) friends had scheduled to have coffee on that same Sunday morning before leaving town in the afternoon. AAPA was the Asian American organization that worked with other student groups to form the TWLF in 1969. Richard Aoki was one of its founding members and was instrumental in bringing different nationalities together into a cohesive force. Instead of bidding each other a happy farewell, they established the Richard Aoki Memorial

HARVEY DONG was active in the Third World Liberation Front Strike at UC Berkeley and later community organizing in the San Francisco Bay Area. In 2002, he received a PhD in Ethnic Studies from UC Berkeley and currently teaches Asian American Studies courses there.

Committee and drafted an official announcement about Richard's passing.

The announcement began:

It is with deep sadness that we inform you that Richard Aoki, due to complications from longstanding medical problems, passed away on March 15, 2009. Born on November 20, 1938, Richard was a righteous fighter and a warrior in the truest sense—he dedicated his life to his beliefs and the struggle for human rights.

It ended with a quote by Richard:

...Based on my experience, I've seen where unity amongst the races has yielded positive results. I don't see any other way for people to gain freedom, justice, and equality here except by being internationalist.

This announcement was emailed broadly and was posted in a Richard Aoki Memorial blog located at <http://ramemorial.blogspot.com/>. The blog provided an avenue for communication with concerned friends and individuals.

Response to the announcement was overwhelming. Many who knew Richard wanted to do something in his memory. What helped facilitate memorial activities was that networks of movement veterans still remained in contact with each other and many continued to be active in organizing. AAPA members were easily contacted because of the recent establishment of the Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) Alumni Chapter at UC Berkeley. The AAPI alumni chapter also outreached to the other individuals involved with the 1969 TWLF. Similarly Black Panther Party (BPP) alumni were easily notified due to the work of Itsabouttime.com, *The Commemorator Newspaper* and Eastside Arts Alliance, where BPP alumni activities are sometimes held. Additionally, Richard maintained contact with everyone he met over the years often speaking at their various functions including forums, public meetings, rallies and funerals. Over the decades, his rolodex was constantly updated with a growing list of contacts. When the news of his death spread, his community coalesced without extreme difficulty.

Local writer Momo Chang had written a biography on Richard that was published in the Oakland Tribune which had generated much readership response. Titled: "Former Black Panther leaves legacy of activism and Third World solidarity", the article had generated writer response from all over the country.

Soon the *Oakland Tribune* blog began to fill with notices:

March 25, 2009

My Mom and I met you at Merritt College and she was a former member of the Party, you did great work and brought alot to the community. Rest in Peace, Power to the People
Cheryln Benavidez,
Chicago, Illinois

March 23, 2009

Thank you Mr. Aoki for bringing civil rights equality closer to reality. Thank you for helping to create Asian American and Ethnic Studies. I am a product of your work and am grateful to have met you. To the family and friends of Mr. Aoki, my sincerest condolences. My prayers are with you.
Dominique N,
Berkeley, California

March 23, 2009

I remember meeting Richard Aoki while we both worked together at Merritt College in the mid 70's for the Counseling Department; memories of him walking in "cool as can be" with his black briefcase, shades - and always ready to help a student or friend in need. I remember his good friend Ken Waters—two great counselors that changed the views of everyone who came across them, views for the betterment of life. You're in the power of our sky and the strength for equal rights. You are and will always be the "right on" man in so many lives mines as well. Power to the people, & power to my brother Richard Aoki, as I thank you for being in my life!
Jose Pena,
Oakland, California

March 22, 2009

we were blessed to have Richard and his example in our lives. Now an ancestor, he shall live on through us as we honor him with our actions, deeds and libations! Shine on Richard and know that you are loved! Many blessings to the friends and family who are experiencing loss.
Mama Ayanna,
Oakland, California

March 20, 2009

Please accept my deepest sympathies.
Toni Duplessis,
Southlake, Texas

March 20, 2009

Thank you Aoki family for giving us this great soldier.

Condolences.

Nzinga Nyagua,
Oakland, California

March 20, 2009

Our thoughts and prayers are with you in your time of grief.

May your memories bring you comfort.

Jun Zuniga,
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

March 20, 2009

Many condolences to the Aoki family. Another champion and treasure of the fight for human rights who will be greatly missed.

Rest in peace, Mr. Aoki.

Nova B.,
Winston-Salem, North Carolina

March 19, 2009

Aloha Aokisung -

You are now among the Stars in the Universe and the saints in the heavens—Continue your work from there so that we may continue it here.

A HUI HOU!

Keonaona,
Kaneohe, Hawaii

March 19, 2009

Dearest Aoki Family,

We who knew Richard at College of Alameda, will always remember his loyalty, dedication, and generosity. He was a kind and loving person. I feel very fortunate to have known him, and to be considered a friend.

Love & Blessings,
Pat Denoncourt

March 19, 2009

In remembrance of a strong, principled and courageous man, you will always be part of us and our struggle.

Power To The People!

Reenie Perez,
Sacramento, California

March 19, 2009

What a gift you were and are to all of us. A joyous righteous man whose power and goodness in the struggle was evident at all times.

Nancy J,
Berkeley, California

The public response to Richard's death was a challenge to make the memorial as inclusive as possible. The memorial event became not just a telling of Richard's life but the history of the movement in which he operated. Participants did not just restate their part of the history but were able to find connections and lessons that in earlier times they were not in the position to discover.

In May 2, 2008, A "Celebration of the Life and Times of Richard Aoki" was held at UC Berkeley's Wheeler Auditorium. This celebration opened with the marching in of BPP alumni and Black August Organizing Committee honor guards leading a moment of silence. A banner made by BPP alumnus Billy X Jenkins stated: "People's Warrior. Richard Aoki. Black Panther and TWLF Member."

What followed was a series of speakers that highlighted Richard Aoki's legacy: his Black Panther Party years, his TWLF activism, his work as an educator for Peralta community colleges and his continued political activism after retirement. The opening addresses were presented by Harvey Dong (of the Memorial Committee and Asian American Studies, UC Berkeley) and Carlos Munoz (Ethnic Studies, UC Berkeley). Those who spoke on Richard's early defining years of activism included: Bobby Seale (chairman of the BPP), Tarika Lewis (the first female member of the BPP), Mike Tagawa (a Japanese American veteran of the BPP in Seattle), and Yuri Kochiyama (longtime human rights activist). Those who spoke to Richard's UC Berkeley TWLF years included: Victoria Wong (AAPA), LaNada War Jack (Native American Students United) and Carl Mack (Afro American Students Union). Speakers that addressed Richard's educational legacy included: Shoshana Arai (of the Memorial Committee), Douglas Daniels (graduate school classmate and friend), Diane Fujino (Richard's biographer) and Bill Sato (co-worker in Peralta Community College system). His latter years of retirement and activism was addressed by Shaka At-Thinnin (chairman of Black August Organizing Committee) and Roberto Hernandez (1999 TWLF of UC Berkeley). Richard's cousin James Aoki thanked the audience who come to celebrate and learn from Richard's life.

Afterwards, a reception was held at the Multi-Cultural Center sponsored by the Ethnic Studies Undergraduate Student Collective. An ancestral shrine made by the Eastside Arts Alliance and Serve The People provided a focal point where poems and messages were read and burned. Korean drumming group Jammaesori (Sister Sound) providing music and leadership in the offering ceremonies. Statements were read from an open mic and a video tribute to Richard was shown by documentarians Ben Wang and Mike Cheng.

Richard Aoki's life history provided a collective memory of the movement. Because he crossed racial boundaries, it provides keys for understanding current race relations. The following are some unique phases of his life.

Citizen No. 13711-C

From 1942 to 1945, Richard, at age four, was interned with his entire family at the Topaz, Utah concentration camp. After World War II, his family resettled in West Oakland where he became childhood friends with future BPP leader Huey P. Newton. In West Oakland he learned to appreciate African American culture and learn the history of Blacks in America. He listened to stories of newcomers from the South who resettled in Oakland.

Richard recalled listening to their stories of racism, discrimination and lynching with a great deal of horror at the fact that in other parts of the United States, conditions were worse than the worse that he had seen in West Oakland.

After his parents' divorce in 1955, Richard lived with his mother in Berkeley and attended Berkeley High School where he is placed in a more integrated environment. He joined the Saints, a multiracial social club. Shortly prior to graduation he enlisted in the U.S. Army while still a senior. He delayed active duty until three days after graduation. After one year of active duty, he remains in the reserve program of the Army for seven years until honorable discharge in 1964. His decision to not re-enlist was related to his questioning of US involvement in Vietnam. He received information from other GI's returning from Vietnam that the war was "dirty" and was going to be picking up in scope. Due to his belief in the bushido code and humanitarianism, he did not want to be placed in the position of having to kill women and children. Still, his military training, Richard assessed, was not wasted but found use later in the movement.

Black Panther Years

In October 1966, Richard attended Merritt College where he reunited with friends Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale. Huey and Bobby drafted the BPP ten-point program and consulted with Richard before finalizing it. Upon completion of the program, he was asked by Huey to join the BPP. Richard did and became a field marshal. He was reluctant to join at first because he was Japanese and not Black. Huey retorted that the struggle for freedom, justice, and equality transcended race. The BPP became the premier revolutionary nationalist organization in the U.S. that challenged institutional racism, imperialism and capitalism. The advances made by the Black Panthers can be viewed by the fact that its demands for "land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, peace and people's community control of modern technology" were supported and adopted demands by other communities of color.

At that time, police brutality was a pressing concern and in one 1967 incident in Richmond, California, Richard became involved in a tense confrontation involving the Black community and the police. Denzel Dowell, a seventeen-year-old African American youth in North Richmond was shot to death by the police. Dowell's mother wanted to organize a rally to air her grievances over the shooting but was denied the permit. She, her family and friends asked the BPP to help secure the park for a public protest. Three carloads of armed Panthers secured the park and stood off several hundred police officers. The rally was conducted without incident and afterwards, every male member of the Dowell family joined the BPP.

AAPA

In July 1968, Richard attended graduate school at UC Berkeley and became a founding member of the Asian American Political Alliance, the first organization of Asian Americans to designate themselves Asian and not the stereotypical "oriental", calling for fundamental revolutionary change in society. In July 1968, Richard made public AAPA's platform that called for 1) an end to racism against Asian Americans; 2) affirmation of the right to self-determination for the Asian American community; 3) support for the struggles of African American, Chicano and American Indians to attain freedom, justice and equality; and 4) opposition to imperialist policies being pursued by the American government. This was especially significant during a time when

the Asian model minority stereotype was touted in public media and by politicians as the answer to black and brown protest militancy. Instead, Richard and other AAPA members supported black and brown liberation movements as well as struggles within the Asian American community.

TWLF

In January 1969, Richard Aoki helped establish the TWLF and became a leader in the student strike for Ethnic Studies. He used his Black Panther and AAPA experience to build unity among people of color in the struggle for Ethnic Studies programs. At the time, a non-responsive university administration controlled by the most conservative governor in the United States, Ronald Reagan attempted to derail the TWLF movement demands for 1) a Third College, 2) Third World people in positions of power, and 3) Third World people in decision-making positions over all programs that involve their community. State repression on the TWLF was extensive and included the use of hundreds of riot police, sheriffs and eventually the U.S. National Guard. Mace and CS gas were dropped on students and there were mass arrests. Richard was active in the TWLF strike as a central committee member where he paid particular attention to ensure that every arrestee was taken care of with bail and legal support. The movement established Ethnic Studies in the University of California system and made it easier to establish similar programs in other campuses.

Educator for the People

Instead of using his education to place himself apart from the people, Richard used it to serve the community. Upon receiving his AA at Merritt Community College, AB in Sociology at UC Berkeley and M.S.W. in Social Welfare from UC Berkeley, Richard Aoki became an educator for the people. He was coordinator for the first Asian American Studies program at UC Berkeley. He was a counselor, instructor, academic senate member, and administrator in the Peralta Community College system. He used his position to greatly improve the lives and educational needs of students in the Peralta Colleges. He encouraged students to continue onward to higher education and spent countless hours advising and writing letters of recommendation. He was faculty sponsor for: Filipino Student Alliance Club (College of Alameda), Native American Student Association (Merritt Col-

lege), Asian American Student Club (Merritt College), and the Black Veterans Association (North Peralta). He was also an active member of the Peralta College employees union that fought for decent job and health benefits and later, retiree health care programs. His community activities also involved serving on the board of directors for various non-profits including: Asian for Job Opportunities in the Bay Area, Berkeley Asian Youth Center and English Language Institute of the Bay Area. He was also ex officio advisor to *The Commemorator*, an African American free monthly newspaper.

Final Years

Richard suffered ups and downs due to deteriorated health these past few years. What helped him greatly was his support base of friends. He looked forward to his aqua exercise classes with his old high school friends Oliver and Barbara Petry. The water exercises greatly helped his blood flow and stamina. He also looked forward to reuniting with old friends at the Black Panther Fortieth Anniversary in 2006, the AAPA Fortieth Commemoration in 2008 and the showing of the documentary about his life at the Eastside Arts Alliance in Oakland. For his seventieth birthday, a large bash was held again at Eastside Arts. Richard was delighted with being emcee the previous summer for the founding meeting of the Serve the People organization, an organization of Southeast Asian youth.

In late 2008, Peralta TV and the Peralta Community College District produced a documentary "Merritt College: Home of the Black Panthers." Richard was not initially interviewed in the first run of the film but fellow Panthers and others asked that his voice be added. The film was selected by the United Nations for a special screening in March 2009 as part of its annual commemoration of the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The screening was held at the United Nations headquarters in New York and is considered a prestigious honor.

Half of Richard Aoki's ashes were interred at the Chapel of the Chimes Columbarium where he shares the same slot with his father Shozo Aoki, and the other half were scattered at sea in the Pacific Ocean where he could join his beloved mother Toshiko Kaniye and stepfather Albert Kaniye. Parental divorce complicated his life even after death. On May 12, 2009, the Oakland City Council passed a Resolution Honoring Richard Aoki For Over Forty Years

of Civil Rights Activism and Community Service. This writer received the posthumous award from the council adding how Richard Aoki loved Oakland and told his students to give back to the community. If he were alive he would gladly accept the award although he would prefer to be outside protesting. The AAPI Alumni Association raised monies to establish a Richard Aoki Scholarship Fund for inner-city youth. Among those selected was Malia Gutu, a Tongan student who was part of the Oakland-based Youth Together organization. Next year she will be attending Howard University with a small scholarship and encouragement so that she too will be among Oakland's best—starting off to learn about the world in order to change it, just like Richard Aoki.