

Oral History of Allyn Bromley

This is March 11, 2021 and it is 11 am. We are at 2207 Mohala Way in lower Manoa Valley, the home of Allyn Bromley (AB) and her husband Brian Baron. We are here to document the oral history of Allyn Bromley as a longtime resident of the valley. My name is Harry Spiegelberg (HS) and I will be conducting the interview.

(HS) Before we begin, I want to document an interesting fact I just found out about Allyn. It turns out that as an accomplished artist she is the one who prepared the logo design for Malama Manoa, an drawing of the back of Manoa Valley. Thank you, Allyn for immortalizing Malama Manoa with your artistic skills.

Now to begin, when did you or your family first arrive in Hawaii, where did they come from and where did they first live in the islands?

(AB) I came alone, at the age of 23 years old looking for adventure. Starting out in the world, I had flunked out of San Jose State University two times. My parents said here is four hundred dollars, go see the world. The first stop was getting off the President Cleveland in Honolulu. The minute my feet hit the soil I knew I was home. It was an unbelievable feeling, saying "this is my place". So, I have lived here since 1952, a period of 69 years. I have left the islands twice, but I have always returned. I started out as a hand to mouth artist working in Waikiki, in a two-story building as an artist depicting local flowers and local Hawaiian imagery on t-shirts. This was before the time they knew how to print t-shirts. I came from San Francisco and I knew from the time when I was about six years old that there was a magical place across the ocean where I had to go. That is why I came here and it was fortuitous. I have been here all these years. I married a haole born on the mainland, but who grew up here. We had two children. Bryann Bromley Nuzzo lives in Boston and Lauran Bromley lives in Honolulu. Bryann has given me three grandchildren, Ben, Emma and Spenser Nuzzo. Life has been marvelous. I cherish every day that I have lived here.

(HS) What type of work did your father do?

(AB) laughter! My father was an electrician for Bethlehem Steel Company. He kept the large cranes moving that picked up scrap metal that was melted down to make steel. This was in South San Francisco. That area where we lived was unincorporated so it was called Lomita Park and later it became known as San Bruno. And to look back now, it is lovely to get old and think about things years ago. They talked about taking down the mountain behind where we lived to make way for San Francisco Airport. And of course, we couldn't conceive of anything like that and now there it is where we take off from and land.

(HS) Allyn, do you have any siblings?

(AB) I have two siblings and they are both elderly like me. Burt Tunzi is 90 and is in good health, and lives in Kelseyville, California and Gaye Moore is 85 and lives in Auburn, California.

(HS) Linda let it slip that you are going to be 93 soon.

(AB) Yes, it will be in June.

(HS) You look terrific!

(AB) Thank you so much!

(HS) I would guess that you were maybe in your mid-eighties.

(AB) I have been blessed with good health. I have one problem that I have gotten taken care of. I am what they call stable now.

(HS) This is great, God Bless You!

(HS) Through the many years that you have lived here, I imagine at some point your parents visited as did your siblings, and that you had a marvelous time showing them the islands.

(AB) Yes, we visited every island except Lanai, but I have been to Lanai recently.

(HS) So you have been to them all!

(AB) Oh yes indeed with the exception of Niihau, unfortunately!

(HS) What was the first car you owned?

(AB) When I first learned to drive was more interesting than what car I owned. I learned to drive a Ford with three pedals. I think one of the pedals was to put the car in gear, one pedal was to put your foot on the gas and the other was to step on the break. I was all of thirteen when I first drove my boyfriend's car behind my parents. I needed my freedom from an early age.

(HS) You said that when you first arrived you lived in Waikiki.

(AB) Oh yes, Waikiki was the haole ghetto. This was on the Diamond Head end of Waikiki and was known as "the jungle". It seems to me that was the only area in Waikiki where people lived who were first arriving. The culture was quite a bit different then. I came to Hawaii with one girlfriend so we could share expenses. We had enough money to stay one night in the Moana Hotel. The next day we moved to the cottages across the street from the Moana where the Kaiulani Hotel is today. I think there were three buildings in Waikiki that had elevators; the Moana, the Royal and the Sai Du Building and maybe the Halekulani. There were no high rises at that time. It was a very different place.

(HS) Paint us a picture of your early childhood. This would be in the Bay Area.

(AB) I had a very normal childhood. My mother and father were conservative people, but intelligent enough to know that they had a trouble maker on their hands. I was not a good student and I didn't like being in school. I only cared about one thing and that was drawing and making pictures, so this was my life's calling.

(HS) When you were growing up what were special food dishes that you enjoyed, your favorite foods?

(AB) Well, my father was Hispanic, a California Mexican and he came from a large family of local Californians. We had a lot of ethnic foods. Enchiladas were a big part of our diet. Apparently, I had a grandmother who was rather famous in the area of Hollister and Watsonville for her Enchilada recipe. I have a book where there is a historical reference to her Enchiladas. What is interesting is that my grandchildren have learned to make them so it is a family tradition. I have a very ethnic and indigenous family background from California who were bean farmers. Now I have a grandson who is half Jewish, Caucasian and a Harvard graduate, teaching at Boston College whose passion is making better Enchilada sauce than was ever made before. My mother was a very Anglo lady from San Francisco.

(HS) Now that you have been in the islands for many, many years, the cuisines are very different from where you came from. Are there any local dishes that you are very fond of?

(AB) Well my very favorite treat is Hawaiian food so in the olden days we would go out to Helena's in Kalihi and currently we go to Highway Inn on Ala Moana Blvd. and have local food. Good food is good fun!

(HS) The next question is for you to tell us what you remember most about school. You have told me that you remember not liking it.

(AB) I remember in the third grade when I was about eight years old, in grammar school we would have open house and of course the teachers would all want their class rooms to look nice. Because I could draw and use colors, they would excuse me from arithmetic class and let me do all of the decorating of the classrooms, so I obviously had a very difficult time during the rest of my life because I couldn't do math. Later I did go back to school. I flunked college twice, they threw me out, and my transcripts were so bad, and I had to get rid of them because I didn't want my grand children to see what a poor student I was. But as an adult I have gone back to the University of Hawaii and I got a BFA in Art there.

(HS) How appropriate!

(AB) And then I got a Masters in Art from the University of Colorado, and graduated in 1972. I then came back to Hawaii and got hired, somewhat by default, by Leeward Community College. I taught there for ten years and it was a wonderful experience, just fabulous!

(HS) From hating school to getting two degrees and ending up as an educator.

(AB) And then I moved from Community College to the main UH Campus. Usually, it goes the other way around. I then worked at the Manoa Campus for sixteen years and retired as Professor Emeritus. Who would have thought!

(HS) That is quite a story! Next can you tell us what hobbies you enjoy?

(AB) I was very physically active until Covid came here. That impacted me in a negative way. I don't like exercising virtually and so I'm not doing exercise now. My other hobbies are just making stuff whatever it is. I have a separate studio that is located in Kalihi and I go there every day.

(HS) What kind of things do you make?

(AB) I often make prints and now I'm making more installation pieces. I like to work with a theme so currently I'm using recycled plastic vegetable containers. I cut them apart so that I have just flat sheets of plastic to print on. I cut them apart and knot them together to make wall hangings. They are unusual. I like to do botanical drawings too As I get older the botanical drawings are getting a bit reminiscent of death and dying, I suppose because that is sort of the next step, isn't it?

(HS) Yes, absolutely! The next question is what do you consider as your most personal accomplishment, but I think perhaps we have already answered that.

(AB) I think that being such a failure in early education and ending up as a full professor ranks way up there. It is a good story for young people to hear if they are struggling with education to show that they too can accomplish what they need when they are ready and committed.

(HS) What year did you and your family live in Manoa Valley?

(AB) I moved up here in 1972 to Huelani Drive. That was with my two girls and they were still in school. I was on Huelani Drive for two years and then I moved to this house in 1975 and I have been here ever since.

(HS) Yes, look at this, you have a million-dollar view!

(AB) And there is kind of a mana about this house. It is a very friendly, nice house. I have been so blessed to mature and get older here. It was built by an architect, Ray Morris, who built many homes in the valley.

(HS) What are your earliest memories of living in the valley?

(AB) It is very pleasant to be here, but more interesting than that, in 1953, I used to come back here to buy orchids from a man, I think he was on Oahu Avenue, but I can't remember his name anymore. I think he had a German name.

(HS) Was his name Kirsch?

(AB) Yes, that is it. Good for you. I think they morphed into Kawamoto Nursery and I still buy orchids from them. I think they bought from Mr. Kirsch. It was wonderful as there were all these little farms behind people's houses. There were Carnation farms and flower farms and I suppose there were vegetables grown also.

(HS) Yup, that there were.

(AB) Yes, lots of them. You lived here during that time.

(HS) Yes, I was born in 1942 and then in the late 40s and early 50s we used to walk from my house on Keahi Street to Manoa Stream, and we would walk on the pathways between the flower and vegetable gardens.

(AB) Wasn't it heavenly then?

(HS) Yes it was.

(AB) It was the most blissful Garden of Eden that I had ever seen.

(HS) It was close to downtown and close to Waikiki, but it was like growing up in the country back there.

(AB) And one of the things I remember as we were talking, it was so quiet back here that we could hear the lions roar in the zoo occasionally if it was very quiet.

(HS) Oh my goodness!

(AB) I know!

(HS) This is wonderful! Tell us of any unique and special experiences you have had in the valley?

(AB) I was a runner for 22 years and this was kind of my workout area. I was challenged by the hills and the level flat areas that were very good places to run. So, for me the land form as a work out place was good. Just to be here was a special experience for me. We are so fortunate that we are high up and don't have to worry about the floods.

(HS) What things or experiences do you miss the most that no longer exist in Manoa Valley?

(AB) I miss not being able to walk alone back to Manoa Falls in the afternoon. There used to be a special house back there that the University of Hawaii owned which was a place for artists to work. A room in this house was given over art students to do their art work and I had one. It was lovely and it was called the Agee House and I think it was donated to the University by the Agee family. It was a lovely facility for the artisans. Then if we wanted, we could go out the back door and run up to Manoa Falls mostly all alone.

(HS) You could put your feet in the stream or the pond from the falls.

(AB) That is right. I do miss that and think about it often.

(HS) You are lucky to have had that experience.

(AB) Yes, I certainly am. I have also visited Haunauma Bay often in the last few years, but too many restrictions now are a disincentive.

(HS) What do you think makes Manoa so special?

(AB) I think the people and the landscape. We have lots of trees and friendly neighbors. I love all of the ethnicities all mixed up. I remember when Safeway was without anything around it and we could drive up and park in the weeds to go shopping. That was nice to live here at that time as it was so simple and easy.

(HS) Malama Manoa has created a survey and could I e-mail it to you?

(AB) I actually have it, but I just haven't done it yet, but will. I am having trouble with my computer so I will do it on my phone.

(HS) That is great. You are far more technical than me. What would you like to see preserved or improved in the valley?

(AB) I would be very pleased to find out how the Safeway parking lot evolved. I think it was Alexander & Baldwin who did such a wonderful job in creating a really nice parking lot. It would be so good to keep them in mind when other development is planned in the valley.

I personally would not like to see the Bird Park extended. If you pay attention, you can find green birds, I think Parrots, flying by here all the time. That is an impact from the Bird Park. They had Parrots that escaped, so now we have these Parrots all over. This is an example of how invasive species occur.

(HS) Tell about the things or experiences you miss the most that are no longer available in the valley?

(AB) I think now that Waioli Tea Room is open again it is wonderful. I have been going there since 1953.

(HS) My mother used to get dinner rolls from their bakery when she would put on a dinner party.

(AB) Oh yes. I used to ask Mrs. Lee, I think that was her name, "How do you make pie crusts, that are so very light and puffy?" She would explain. I don't know what else I miss as progress is progress, things change and you have to adjust. You can't say that I wish there still were flower and vegetable farms like it was before. So, I don't know what I miss. What do you miss?

(HS) When I was growing up in the house that I was raised in, it was the last house on the street and everything mauka was Hono Hono grass, Mango trees and what not and up on the Ewa side of the mountain going up to Tantalus was a cave that went in maybe fifty feet or so. We would climb up there with our lunch of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches etc. in a bag and have our lunch in the cave and enjoy the marvelous view of everything makai. I miss swimming in Manoa Stream. I remember going over to the stream with my brother and sister and then skinny dipping. Some of the tough tita girls from the Salvation Army came over and drove us off. We put our clothes back on and ran home. I feel so blessed that I was raised where I was raised. It was just a once in a lifetime experience.

We have gone through most of the questions of inquiry. Can you think of anyone you know in the valley who would make an interesting subject to include in our search of oral histories?

(AB) I wonder if Jan Tucker might be someone to consider. I only know Jan through the museum or as we used to call it the Art Academy. The museum was kind of my community service as I have been a docent with them for almost thirty years. I met Jan at Jeremy Lam's lanai with an interest in Outdoor Circle things. Linda would know others to recommend. Has Linda Legrande been interviewed?

(HS) It looks like the weather is changing and getting warmer without so much wind and rain. Tomorrow is Friday. Do you think that you and Linda will be going down to Kaimana Beach to swim?

(AB) Since last April I have stepped back from being social and just not going out except to swim. The water at Kaimana Beach is so healing. I love going there to swim and have done so for years.

(HS) It will all work out and you will do both.

I feel like if we didn't cover this event in the interview, we would be remiss. I am talking about the Preis Hawaii Arts Alliance founded by Alfred Preis and modeled after the Kennedy Center Honors. Annually they look for a deserving individual for their lifetime commitment to arts and education. Through out the years honorees have been artists, educators, community leaders and philanthropists. On Saturday January 18, 2014 the Alliance celebrated and honored you for your dedication to these important aspects of all of our lives. Please comment on the worthy award and were you surprised when they gave you the award?

(AB) No it was not a surprise, in fact I helped plan the party. The committee said It was an acknowledgment of my giving back a lifetime commitment to arts and education. I can list a whole bunch of people more deserving than I. But they said they aren't as old as you so they don't qualify. I thought that was one good reason to be old. Laughter!

(HS) Allyn Bromley thank you so much. It has been a real pleasure meeting you and you have had a fascinating life.

(AB) Yes it has been, but its not over. I like to see things move forward. I'm currently involved in the development of a facility combating human trafficking. A group of people, including my two girls, are building a facility to house and reeducate abused children. Their building has no artwork on the walls, so I am gathering a collection from my artist friends for them. The facility will be called Ho'ola Na Pua and I hope that by beautifying the walls, these children can be helped back to good health.

(HS) That is calling to you I am sure.

(AB) Yes, it is. I don't have the energy that I used to, but I can do this.

(HS) I am sure this will be in the news and when I read about it I will think of you beatifying those empty walls for these special children by contributions from local artists.

(AB) Harry, thank you for doing this interview as it has been lovely. I hope that I've made some kind of positive contribution to your efforts.

(HS) Indeed you have. People ask me why I do this and this is my kuleana of what I do for Malama Manoa. When I was younger, I was very shy and I never would have done this. But at other points of my life, I was drawn out and I now look at this as a wonderful opportunity to meet new people and to get to know them, and perhaps, learn intimate parts of their lives in doing these interviews.

(AB) Well good. Again, I thank you for this opportunity.

(HS) It has been my pleasure!