

University of San Diego

Digital USD

---

Ethnic Studies Oral Histories

Department of Ethnic Studies

---

9-24-2023

## Oral History with Brandon Lee Julian

Brandon Lee Julian

Jocelyn Yam

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital.sandiego.edu/ethn-oh>

---

### Digital USD Citation

Julian, Brandon Lee and Yam, Jocelyn, "Oral History with Brandon Lee Julian" (2023). *Ethnic Studies Oral Histories*. 2.

<https://digital.sandiego.edu/ethn-oh/2>

This Oral History is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Ethnic Studies at Digital USD. It has been accepted for inclusion in Ethnic Studies Oral Histories by an authorized administrator of Digital USD. For more information, please contact [digital@sandiego.edu](mailto:digital@sandiego.edu).



## *Ethnic Studies Oral History Project* *University of San Diego*

Narrator: Brandon Lee Julian  
Interview Date: September 24, 2023  
Interview Location: PIFA, Ski Beach, San Diego, CA  
Interviewed by: Jocelyn Yam  
Duration: 24 minutes

Summary: In this oral history, Brandon Lee Julian, tells us about his educational background, while addressing the journey from Hawaii to New York. Additionally, Brandon touches on the topic of misrepresentation and having this repetition of teaching others his heritage. By mentioning that, people don't know much about Hawaii, other than 'aloha', 'grass skirts' and his personal experience with a New York classmate.

### **KEYWORDS**

people, hawaiian, hear, high school, remember, school, practice, hawaii, journey, nursing, grandmother, california, ethnic background, education, culture, kid, learning, educating, happening, identity

00:11

Jocelyn Yam:

Today is Sunday September 24. We are at the Pacific Islander Festival at Ski Beach, in Mission Bay San Diego California. My name is Jocelyn Yam, I am a student at the University of San Diego, in the Ethnic Studies Race and Oral History class. Thank you for telling us your story today. Can you please tell us your name and date of birth.

00:45

Brandon Lee Julian:

Yeah. Do I need your mic? Or do I just speak into- nevermind I'm good. My name is Brandon Lee Julian, date of birth 12/21/92.

01:02

JY:

We are recording part of your educational experience today. Do you give permission?

BJ:

Yes.

JY:

Hi Brandon, how would you identified?

01:19

BJ:

In terms like just in general?

JY:

I believe, ethnically, how do you identify?

01:25

BJ:

Ethnically, I identify as Kanaka Maoli, as a Filipino and Chinese, those are my ethnic backgrounds.

01:38

JY:

What island or islands do you and your family represent?

01:43

BJ:

Originally my family was from Big Island, my Hawaiian family is from the Big Island, but my grandmother moved over to O'ahu and that's where my mom was born. And that's where I was born and raised. So we got two islands that we got representing but for the most part, O'ahu is where I identify to be from.

02:09

JY:

How has been your educational experience this far?

02:14

BJ:

Sort of in general, it's been an interesting journey. So just like, as I was saying before, in high school, I went to Kamehameha school, which if you don't know, it was a controversial school at one point because it gave preference to students of Native Hawaiian descent but there was also other preferences it had, such as to people who are- kids who are orphans, and so on and so forth. And that were sort of disadvantaged in one way or another. But it was a very interesting experience, because for four years of my life, I was pretty much surrounded by other Native Hawaiian students that, you know, had other different ethnic backgrounds in addition to being Hawaiian. And I would say that was probably one of the- one of my favorite school experiences. A lot of people will say, here in the US, they you know, they wouldn't- they wouldn't redo high school all over again. They wouldn't you know, high school was like the worst. They didn't like it. I actually enjoyed it. You know, I enjoyed my high school experience. And I think a lot of it was because I went to that school. That school on the mountain with that beautiful view, I do miss it. And then somehow I got, you know, after high school, I got pushed all the way to New York. So I was in New York for about four or five years, and I was doing a communications field there. And, you know, I stayed in it for like, a year, year and a half. And then I, I said, you know, forget it. This isn't really going anywhere. And I needed a change of pace and change of scenery, because New York City was a completely different environment. You know, you go from Hawaii, all the way to New York, and not just like New York, but like the city, right? Because if you go upstate, It's beautiful up there. It's green, and it's lush, but in the city, it's just a concrete jungle. So I left and I went to Indiana, middle of nowhere, and went to, and I studied nursing there. I started nursing, gosh. Start my academic journey started back in 2016. And then I graduated. I got my nursing license, practice in the hospital for a couple of years before I hitched a ride on to a travel agency and made my way out to California. I always knew I'd come back to California because eventually my goal is to kind of get back home. So that's kind of been my educational journey so far. But they've been kind of very polarizing experiences, cause back home I was, you know, for lack of better words or a better sense, I was in sort of a majority, you know, then I came up to the US and people like you almost nothing about Hawaii, despite, you know, being part of the US for how many decades and being a state for how many decades, people didn't really know anything except the words, aloha and grass skirts, and an undergrass, you know, grass hunt. I remember even having one of my classmates, back in New York saying, when you guys have crossed the street, do you guys have like a hula girl?

Like, you know, on a- blinking, you know how we have the white man and there's a stop sign? I was like. No, but I guess it would be kind of cool if we did. But, yeah no. So, it's interesting that people have certain perceptions of places and Hawaii is like this beautiful, like lush, paradise. And it was kind of- kind of a little bit annoying to have to tell them what it really was. Because you know, for years, sometimes it could feel like infringing on their sort of perceptual boundary, because they have this idea. And you're just breaking it down for them, kind of thing. And in a sense, it just kind of- it just kills the mood. "Oh I love Hawaii," well there's a lot of bad things happening there. They're like, Oh- kind of thing. So it's a mood killer, but also, people also have to be willing to listen and willing to be receptive to the information that you give them. So I did find myself educating a lot of people a lot in my, in my college years, both in New York and in Indiana. And I was never part of like an official club or anything, because the campus I went to didn't really have a present, since I was the only person from Hawaii with one other student, I don't remember how many kids we had there, you know. And oftentimes, we kind of get grouped into sort of the Asian group as well. So, you know, our identity was kind of melded with Asia, which historically especially in Hawaii, there's a lot of Asian presence, lots Asian influence?. But mind you, there was a, there was a group of people there, there was a culture of existence there even before, you know, the 1800s had come along there, you know, there are people that was practicing their ways of life, they have their own language, and, you know, they, they were just kind of doing their own things. So, I really liked what you guys are kind of doing here, and you really give him like rise and voice to, you know, the Pacific Island because, you know, if you really look at it, you know, we really are a small people. You know, I mean, the continent of Asia has like what? A third of the world's population, at least. Right? So, it's nice to know that there are people out there wanting to hear voices, too, like Pacific Islanders. You know, that's kind of been like my educational experience. So far, you know, just kind of educating people along the way. But you'd be really surprised that there are some people that do come up to you, and they actually know what's going on. In California, I think a lot of people here are pretty, for lack of a better term- woke. A lot of people really are because I've met a lot of people that have, you know, when they asked me oh where you from? And I say I'm from Hawaii,- they are like, oh you know I want to travel there, but I heard that, you know, a lot of the locals don't want us traveling there. And I'm like, wow, I mean, you make it sound bad but the word is spreading, you know, kind of thing. So something like this, and everyone doing different, their outreach and educating other people. Clearly, the only way to solve a lot of the problems we have these days is really just through education. So the journey is gonna be up and down and rocky, but I think that as long as we all kind of do our part, I think we make the world a better place. And I would, I like to think I tried to make the world a better place by educating people as annoying as sort of- even irritating as it kind of was to hear sort of certain harmful stereotypes over and over again. You know, I feel like you still have sort of that kuleana, that responsibility to go out and teach people you know.

09:46

Unknown Speaker:

And so Brandon [inaudible] and where will that take you?

09:52

BJ:

Oh okay, what is the future? The future for my educational journey is I would like to eventually go back to school, so- I'm still a practicing nurse, and I still have my active RN license here in the state of California. I graduated from nursing school back in 2018, I believe. And eventually, I'm kind of conflicted. But I don't know if I want to go back to school, to further my nursing career, or if I want to do something completely different, you know, I'm sure you've probably heard all of the burnout happening in the healthcare industry, especially among nurses. And it's true. It's true. There's a lot going on, because there's a lot expected of us. But there's also a lot of bureaucracy and nursing policies and regulations state to state on a national level, but a lot of nurses have been fighting against it. You know, and unionizing for it. Kind of one of the big things that was happening here in California, especially in certain areas of healthcare. So there's battles in every place that you go to, on your ethnic background, on your professional background, there's always something that needs to be fought. But- you know, what you believe in is right and true? Can you speak to that? That's important. That's the difference. Right? So for my educational journey, I love to back to school, I love school, I do. Like, I don't know what it is, maybe I'm like one of the few people that will say that they do. I do love school. I do like learning. Learning is, learning is important- learning solves a lot of problems. A lot of people who do I hate to say a lot of people that do dumb things just most of the time don't really know better. You know, they don't know that things, you know, are better this or this is harmful to someone else, or harmful to themselves, you know, their education is key and is crucial. But there needs to be navigation through education for a lot of people, because there are a lot of things that I wish that I was told, that might have shaped my educational career a little differently. You know, I think one of the big things for me was getting pushed to go to college right out of high school. And I had no idea what I wanted to do all I knew I was supposed to go to college, I was supposed to do this, this, this this, and maybe if, you know, I didn't rush into things, things might have turned out a little bit differently, for me. You know, I think people need more life experience before they make that higher education commitment and decision. You know, so I am in that place right now where. You know, I've kind of gone through that. And I know I want to go back to school, but I know I also have time as well. So by taking the time that I have now back then, again, I think I probably would have been in a different place. But we'll see whether it's like nurse practitioner or switching careers and doing something else. I'm not really sure. But I'm kind of comfortable. where I'm at now.

13:18

JY:

If I may ask, I'm very interested in how your high school journey of going to a exclusive school for a certain type of population. How has that- I guess I would for you to expand longer, like how has that affected your choice on career? Because you also spoke about like, your calling to educate others. Which I feel like nursing, you like helping others. So I guess I like to hear more about like, how has going to that specific high school affect [inaudible]

14:15

BJ:

Absolutely, so I went to Kamehameha school in the Kapālama campus 2006 to 2010, and that journey was interesting. First off, I don't want to call it an exclusive school because when being exclusive, you kind of put into the context of something that you know, like special, like special and, you know, higher value and this and that and I usually when I hear more in like commercials- for context, I wouldn't say that it was an exclusive school. Oh, you know, it's like, you know, cream of the crop, kind of stuff like that. I will say it was one that had a mission to bring the people back home, especially really the native Hawaiians back home, because were kind of doing pretty bad in the income bracket down there. You know, a lot of us are living in poverty and what-not. And a lot of them our great monarchs were very, very astute, and they were very future focused about the people, especially after the illegal overthrow, you know, one of the things that we have, with education. And so I don't want to get into sort of the evolution of Kamehameha schools, because it isn't, it wasn't. What it was when it started isn't the same as it is now. At one point, there wasn't a big focus on Hawaiiana. You know, a lot of it was sort of adapting more to the American sort of system. But I'm very grateful that I went there, because I learned a lot about my Hawaiian background. Prior to that, really, my only connection to my Hawaiian background was through my grandmother. You know, our Kūpuna, they're so highly revered in Hawaii. And I didn't really know that at the time, when I was a kid, if I knew then what I do, now I would have done, you know, 1000 things sort of different. But when you're a kid, you know, your kid. You don't really know better, until you start learning more, but I remember getting my acceptance letter, and remember seeing how excited my mom was, you know, I can still see her to this day. You know, in the mailbox, and I just hear her screaming, and I'm like, What is going on? So, but I'm very grateful that I went there, because I got to learn a lot of Hawaiian history. You know, while sort of seeing our values kind of practice, there in real time. It's interesting seeing how different people from different walks of life can kind of come together for a very common cause or a common thing, if you will. You know, there are song contest is a really big one that brings all of us together. I love doing song contests. However, that was because we got a class like earlier, what have you. You

know, so we had that with Founders Day, there were these big things that kind of also helped me to be prideful in your background. You know, and because of that, I was able to speak a little bit more of my grandmother and kind of get her story a little bit more, she passed away about, you know, halfway, not even halfway through my high school journey, but now that I'm an adult, I look back on it. And, you know, I look back on a lot of the things that I did with my grandmother than I did with my school. And I look at it with a lot of reverence, you know, and a lot of appreciation, and it kind of drives what I do now. Because I, I came to San Diego, three years ago, three half years ago, and I, you know, I wanted to get back into sort of Hawaiian culture, Hawaiiana and so, I joined Hula, you know, I used to do that as a kid. And I stopped for I don't really know why. I don't know what reason, but I joined Hula. And I started to, like, pick up the language and this and that, you know, and I feel like a lot of this is happening because I had sort of a foundation back then. Back in high school and back with my grandmother, you know, a lot of the things that I'm kind of seeing- kind of practicing now and looking back and I'm like, wow, well, I remember learning about it back then. But I was just sort of a dormant seed that took like, 10 years after high school to kind of really understand and grow kind of thing. It's interesting, because I just, I never thought I would be here. I never thought I didn't know where I was gonna be after high school. You know, I knew I'd go to college. I have no idea where the world was gonna take me. You know, I just knew that I needed to have an identity. And for the longest time after high school, you know, I was very proud of, you know, being Hawaiian, but when I left, and I went to the mainland, it went out the window. You know, it was kind of gone. And it wasn't until I kind of progressed in life and develop more of myself as a human that I started, you know, understanding the connections that I had back home a little bit more. Understanding the values, the teachings and the lessons a little bit more. And ultimately, I'd like to go back home. You know, I don't know, I think I strayed from your question. But if there's anything I'm missing just shoot it forward.

20:32

JY:

How can Island Grad ceremony best recognize future graduates?

20:37

BJ:

Oh, honestly, by just kind of practicing our culture. You know, when I graduated from high school in New York, my parents and the other Hawaii kid, like our family, we're the only ones passing out leis to everybody. And you know, and that already gives a presence of yourself and who you are, and where you come from, you know, and it's gotten to the point where a lot of people are like, non- Hawaiians like on the mainland are even doing that, you know, I don't know, I saw pictures from somewhere, I don't even remember somewhere in the Midwest, I'm like, Oh, if you were



doing leis and like, I don't think there's a Hawaii person there from what I remember. But you know, our culture is very infectious like that, you know, we have affection in our culture, and a lot of reasons to celebrate, you know. I mean, Hawaiians, they were all about having a great time, you know, le'ale'a, you know that was have a good time. And I think that's the best way we can really appreciate is, if you can be yourself and practice your background, practice your culture, just openly, you know, just openly freely, you know, that, that was probably one of the biggest injuries to Hawaii, and just indigenous peoples all across the, you know, the New World, from the Americas into the Pacific, Australia, I think that was probably one of the biggest insult and injury for us was that our Kūpuna felt so ashamed. And they were, you know, taught to be ashamed. They didn't have a practice there. You know, so I'm not an 'ōlelo speaker, but my grandmother was, but she never taught us, she never passed the 'ōlelo down, and there's countless other stories with other people back home about that, you know, they don't speak Hawaiian, they don't know the culture very well, because they, they gave it up, they were forced to give it. You know, I heard stories from my parents, my aunt, my uncle's about how when, you know, my grandma was in school, and if they spoke a lick of Hawaiian they would get, they would get nasty beatings from the teachers- put that into perspective, this day, we would be, you know, making lawsuits left and right, right? Against the teacher for even doing that for even thinking that, but back then that was what they thought was okay! And they know that it wasn't okay. But that kind of instills sort of a fear, and sort of a distaste for your own identity and for your own self. And so, you know, the best way that you can celebrate someone is to allow them to be, you know, and allow them to express themselves, you know, give them cheehoos and whatnot, you know, at graduation, my family were doing it, you know, the, you know, when the Dean or the I don't remember- whoever was calling names across the stage, and you're like, yeah, and then my name came up, I just hear this huge, like, you know roar from my family, and everyone's like, Who the hell is that? I'm like, that's sort of the best thing that you can do is- just kind of freely practice, you know, your culture and what you're used to and what what brings you joy. Just kind of out with everyone. Because it was us not practicing who we were that was the biggest injury to our people, to our people and to all indigenous people. The biggest insult for us.

24:25

JY:

Thank you.

BJ:

No problem. Yeah, I appreciate it. Thank you so much for having me.