
Honoring Karl Kawahara



By his own admission, Karl K. Kawahara might hold the record for the most nicknames for a Hilo High School teacher. K³, San-K, Java, Karlos and Mr. K are but a few of the more popular ones. “This to me,” Kawahara says in his infinite wisdom, “is respect in a different form.”

Kawahara’s journey to becoming what some would say is Hilo High School’s most iconic teacher began in 1961, when he entered his first year teaching social studies and public speaking. With the exception of two years spent as a Legislative Assistant at County of Hawaii, Kawahara taught at Hilo High School for 30 years until his retirement in 1993.

In his early years, Kawahara earned a reputation as a strict, no-nonsense teacher. He pushed his students to think and was known as a tough grader who was usually assigned the “better” students.

Kawahara can recount numerous examples in which he upset students because he gave them a lower grade than they expected. In certain instances, he prevented students from participating in extracurricular activities because they failed to meet certain requirements. Later, he recalls, many of these students returned to thank him, because he had taught them some important life lessons, such as responsibility.

“My guiding philosophy in teaching,” Kawahara says, “is that the welfare of the student is foremost.” His concern for students is reflected in his remarkable memory for students’ names and other specific details from years past. “Like many other teachers, I do recollect the ‘real good’ and ‘real bad’ ones first and foremost, but I also remember many others because I placed high emphasis on their welfare and well-being,” he explained. “I always felt that I treated my students as fairly as was humanly possible for me to do. I always tried to maintain a rapport with students.”

Another key Kawahara quality is that his concern for and association with students doesn’t end with their graduation, as he manages to keep in touch with many of his former students. “I’ve also advised students in their reunions and other post-graduation gatherings over the years. I find a certain camaraderie with them and continue to do so even after all these years.”

For many, Kawahara was and still is the face of an institution that at times could feel so large that you could feel lost in it. He was the heart and soul of the school, the reason many of us have remained connected to it years after we left. He was that person of authority who not only remembered your name, but what class you were in, and who your siblings and best friends were. Whether you know him as Mr. K, K³, San-K, Karlos, or Java, he is the reason many of us are here tonight, to say thanks to the one who breathes life into the motto: “Once a Viking; always a Viking!”
