

Obama Inauguration

# Retired teachers on Maui recall young, 'cute' student Barry

## Instructors worked at Noelani Elementary School on Oahu when Obama was in kindergarten class

January 21, 2009  
By CLAUDINE SAN NICOLAS, Staff Writer

Save |

As student teachers, it never occurred to Aimee Yatsushiro or Katherine Nakamoto that a cute 5-year-old from their first teaching experience would become president one day, actually the first African-American president.

"You tell students all the time you can be whatever you want to be when you grow up," Nakamoto said. "And now here's Barack Obama. He's president. Who would have thought?"

Yatsushiro, a retired teacher from Kahului, served as a student teacher from September to December 1966 at Noelani Elementary School on Oahu. Her supervising teacher was Kazuko Sakai, the primary educator for about 25 students in a kindergarten class that included a boy named Barack "Barry" Obama.

### Article Photos



Maui teachers Katherine Nakamoto (right) and Aimee Yatsushiro (left) holding a photo of Barack Obama as a young child.



"He was a cute, likable, heavy build-child," Yatsushiro recalled. "I could visualize Barry smiling, dressed in his long-sleeved, white shirt tucked into his brown Bermuda shorts, and wearing laced shoes."

Nakamoto, also a retired teacher now living in Wailuku, coincidentally was assigned to the same kindergarten class, only this time from January to June of 1967. Nakamoto said she never used a nickname for the student. "We called him Barack. . . . He was very well mannered, respectful, confident and independent."

Both women were filled with pride Tuesday morning as they watched the inauguration and festivities unfold on television.

"I don't cry very easily," Yatsushiro said. "But today I had tears. It was very moving. Obama did a good job, and it was an excellent presentation."

### News, Blogs & Events

I am looking for:

in:  News, Blogs & Events  Web  EZToUse.com

**EZ To Use ISLAND PAGES.com** ISLAND PAGES ONLINE CONNECTION

Click here for local business and residential phone listings.

[Medicare Supplement Plans](#)

Medigap Options for (65 & older). Compare Plans & Prices for 2015.

[Enterprise Mobility](#)

Get Mobility Planning & Integration Services from the IT Experts at CDW

Nakamoto said she woke up as she does most mornings at 4:30 a.m. and stayed glued to the TV for much of the day. "It was all so nice and very impressive."

Comparing notes with each other, Nakamoto and Yatsushiro described Obama and his kindergarten classmates as a "wonderful group of children."

"Barry Obama and the rest of his class were an impressive bunch of children who made us want to teach. They're a lot of the reason we decided to continue and be teachers."

Nakamoto's teaching career started on Oahu where she taught for five years. She retired in the year 2000 from Wailuku Elementary School after more than 31 years of service with the Hawaii Department of Education.

Yatsushiro spent all 28 years of her teaching career at Haiku Elementary School where she retired in 1995.

Both Nakamoto and Yatsushiro hadn't thought about Obama and their student teaching experiences with his kindergarten class until early last year when they saw him on TV and learned of his candidacy for president.

Soon after seeing Obama on the Oprah television talk show, Yatsushiro pulled out a spring 1967 kindergarten class photograph that Sakai had mailed her with a note about how the children were still talking about their former student teacher.

In the photograph, Nakamoto stands immediately behind a 5-year-old Obama.

"He (Obama) was always nicely dressed," Nakamoto said as she looked at the old photograph recently. "He wasn't outstanding in any way like being naughty or anything. I just remember him being confident, like the way a president should be."

Yatsushiro and Nakamoto said they've never talked to Obama since his grade school days, but the personality he displays in public very much mirrors what he was like when he was in kindergarten.

"He was a good listener from the time he was little," Yatsushiro said. "I remember him always smiling and observing, just watching all the time, smiling and observing. He didn't have to be the center of attention."

"I think he'll make a good president," Nakamoto said. "I just feel like he's not afraid. That's how he was when he was small and that's how he is now."

Both women said they voted for Obama.

Their hopes are that he'll bring peace to the United States and the world. His toughest job will be to turn around a sagging economy. "It'll be very challenging for him. Poor thing," Yatsushiro said.

"Though people say he doesn't have much experience, I think he has the spirit to make a fine and intelligent president," Nakamoto said.

Neither of the retired teachers have any plans to visit Obama in Washington, D.C.

"It would be nice just to meet him one day," Yatsushiro said. "I'd love to shake his hand."

Yatsushiro and Nakamoto, both 64, became close friends during their teaching days on Maui. Their sons have become best friends and the two have spent many times enjoying special occasions over the years like birthdays and weddings.

Nakamoto and her husband, Francis, have four children and six grandchildren. In her spare time, Mrs. Nakamoto takes sewing and bunka (Japanese embroidery) classes at Kaunoa Senior Center and helps to care for her grandchildren. She was a substitute teacher for a number of years.

Yatsushiro and her former husband, Vance, have two children and one grandchild on the way. She serves as primary caregiver of her 92-year-old mother and is active with the Alpha Delta Kappa teachers sorority and as a board member of the Haiku Living Legacy Project.

She's also coordinated the Mental Health Association on Maui's annual poster contest for children.

\* Claudine San Nicolas can be reached at [claudine@mauinews.com](mailto:claudine@mauinews.com).

[Save](#) |

[Subscribe to The Maui News](#)

### Sponsored From Around the Web



[Ever Googled Yourself? This Site Reveals All, Take a Look](#)



[The 5 Dumbest Things to Do If You're in Debt](#)



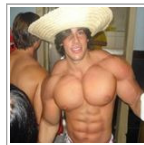
[Simple Method 'Regrows' Hair. Do This](#)



[Remove Your Eye Bags Instantly](#)



[Controversial "Limitless Pill"](#)



[Controversy Over New Safe "Steroid Alternative"](#)



[1 Odd Method Restores Your 20/20 Vision. Try This...](#)



[How New iPads are Selling for Under \\$40](#)

?