

Martinez Oral History Project

Interview Date: August 1, 2020
Interview Location: Homeless Encampment at Amphitheater, Martinez, CA.
Interviewer: Deborah Zamaria
Interviewee: Richard Kealoha Low

Richard Kealoha, or Dickie as he is known by many, was born on October 2, 1948 at Queens Hospital in Honolulu on the island of O'ahu in Hawaii. His father was Paul Blaize Low and his mother was Lucille Rose Cardeno. According to research his family has done, his great grandfather came from China to Hawaii as a doctor and married someone from the Hawaiian royal family.

Paul owned a landscape and garden business on Kaua'i and Richard's mother Lucille, whose family was from Puerto Rico, took care of the children. Richard doesn't know how his parents met but they had seven children, all born in Hawaii before it became a state, and Richard was the youngest.

His siblings were, in order, Lola May, Jacqueline Dale, Alberta Lelani, Darleen, Paul Blaize, Jr., Robert, Glenn and Richard.

In 1953, his mother came to California with most of her children to try to find a new life. Some of her siblings, including Richard's Uncle Richard who was married to Aunt Jackie, Uncle Danny who was married to Aunt Stella, and Uncle Eddie who was married to Aunt Linda, were already in the United States and living in Oakland. Lucille left her youngest, Richard, back in Hawaii with grandparents and he came later.

By this time, Richard's father was out of the picture, so his mother struggled to find work and care for her seven children. She had to have them live at Fred Finch, an orphanage for children under 18 years of age, in the Diamond District in Oakland. He does remember going on some field trips while at this orphanage and his sister Jackie was always by his side, refusing to leave him there by himself even when his other siblings had gone home to live with their mother.

Eventually, when he was around seven years old, he was able to move back with his mother and siblings. At first, he remembers living in the Projects on 55th Ave. Next they moved to 65th Ave. and finally the Projects on 98th Ave.

Eventually, since his sister Jackie was much older than him and had gotten married to Ricardo, he moved with them to a little house in Hayward on 2nd Street.

The next several years were very difficult for Richard as he was in and out of many prisons. From about nine years of age, when he went to California Youth Authority (CYA) for being incorrigible until he was about 50 years old, the decisions he made earned him a lot of prison time. At 15 he was arrested for breaking into a gun shop

and stealing guns. He went to Juvenile Hall and had to be put in isolation, referred to as The Hole. He couldn't be with the other young people because by that time he'd already been in a prison with adults. He spent time in CYA, 18 months in Folsom Prison, several years in Soledad and San Quentin, etc. all the time because of armed robbery. He explained that he needed money. He didn't want the merchandise and he didn't want to hurt anybody. But he saw people work all week for only \$100 and knew that he could make several thousand with one robbery.

He tried working with his brother-in-law, Ricardo for a bit. Ricardo owned a construction company in Pacheco and Richard would work with him on and off, but eventually he quit.

Ultimately, what Richard learned however was "Fast money ain't good money."

As a young boy Richard attended several schools. He was enrolled in Lockwood Elementary School in Oakland and then James Madison Junior High in Oakland for 7th, 8th and 9th grades. He attended Sunset High School in Hayward for a couple of days, but then went back to prison. Richard did get his high school equivalency certificate while he was in San Quentin around 1972. His sister Jackie has the tassel and his certificate of graduation in a special chest at her home. Richard was always good at math and reading comprehension but spelling continues to be a challenge for him.

He married his first wife, Theresa, for "convenience" in 1980. They bore a child, Richard Martinez (Low) who currently lives in Louisiana. He married his second wife, Pam, to help her out as a friend. A man was harassing her and Richard knew that if he married her, he could temporarily protect her. They never lived together.

His third wife, Debbie, was the woman he married for love. They met in Martinez, California and married in Lake Tahoe. She had been the babysitter for his brother's kids so he'd known her for a while. She had been a paralegal when they met and fell in love and after their wedding they lived in Concord, Pacheco and Vacaville, both of them delivering papers for the San Francisco Chronicle.

Debbie came to the marriage with three children of her own. Although they really loved each other, Debbie and Richard were in and out of prison for many of their married years. The children would alternate which parent they would stay with and occasionally they stayed with her parents.

Eventually, their marriage broke up because Debbie felt that Richard had broken a promise to pick up the children from an event. She took the children and moved to Oregon and currently lives there.

Richard has one more child from a union with Alice Orpeza. When Richard was around 15 years old, he met Alice and they bore a child, Tony Low. Alice was

incarcerated at CYA when she was pregnant with Tony. Tony is now in prison, but Richard has visiting rights.

After this, Richard stayed out of jail and turned his life around. In this interview, he stated, " When I went to work in Arizona, my life started changing. I realized that working was a lot better than being in jail. I also realized that I liked being around people and helping others. Helping other people made me feel good about myself. "

Next, he decided to take a vacation to Juneau, Alaska to visit his nieces and ended up getting a job at a fishery place, cleaning fish.

From there he heard about a job at the Kensington Gold Mine. He held the position of second cook for all of the miners for almost four years. He'd work 12 hours a day for 30 days straight and then get two weeks off, making \$10 an hour with significant overtime pay.

Richard saved enough money to go on many trips at various places around the world.

The first trip he took was with his friend, the boss or first cook at the gold mine. They went to Laos and stayed with the family of the boss's wife. The wife's mother lived there and although language was a problem, he loved traveling there.

After his job as cook at the gold mine, he worked as the head housekeeper at a hotel in the Grand Canyon. He became friends with a Chinese couple who were staying there as guests. The man was a pharmacist and the woman was an acupuncturist and they invited him to come to a small island off of the southern coast of China called, Haikou. Again, the couple had family there so their lodgings were free. An uncle of one of his friends was a general in the Chinese Army, so he assigned two soldiers to protect Richard and translate for him. He stayed one month.

Other trips took him to Thailand, Vancouver, and Florida. He visited Florida at least four times but he would always return to the Bay Area, usually to help a family member who was ill.

He has always maintained his relationship with his sister Jackie and her husband Ricardo and was there to care for her when she had a triple bypass surgery on her heart. He also cared for his brother-in-law when he was ill.

Richard has chosen to be at the encampment saying he wants to better himself. He's one of the hardest workers there, doing more than his fair share of work. His goal is to work with his friend Lori Ray, also at the encampment, and start a small landscaping business with her. He would like to use his stimulus check to buy a small van and some tools and work in the Martinez community and nearby communities.

He is already showing his skills and a strong work ethic by improving the landscape in the encampment, trimming bushes, clearing weeds and generally caring for the grounds.

Richard also watches out for some of the other residents at the camp, especially some of the younger ones, making sure they're ok and checking in on them.

He is a great addition to this camp and this interviewer wishes him good luck in his future plans.