



## Okinawan Memories Initiative

**Partnering with the Okinawan  
American Association to Amplify  
Okinawan Voices**

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## Thinking Globally about Okinawa

The Okinawa Memories Initiative, a collaboration between UC Santa Cruz Associate Professor of History Alan Christy and the Okinawan Association of America (OAA), aims to rethink the history of postwar Okinawa by focusing attention on the Okinawan diaspora. An interdisciplinary and transnational public history project, the initiative was inspired by a collection of photographs taken in Okinawa in 1952-53 by American Army Captain Charles Eugene Gail. Currently, Christy, who directs the Center for the Study of Pacific War Memories, and his team are developing a traveling exhibition of Gail's photographs and accompanying digital archive of photos, key texts and documents, oral histories from both American and Okinawan voices, along with undergraduate student research and writing.

A national organization dedicated to uplifting Okinawan culture and supporting members of the Okinawan diaspora in the United States, the OAA is a major contributor to the initiative. Christy's team is working with the organization's largest branch in Gardena, California to transform their materials into an organized archive for the community. Guided by an ethos of doing history as a form of public engagement and service, the project foregrounds the interests and needs of the community whose history is being explored.

## Amplifying Okinawan Voices

The partnership with the OAA began in 2018. Earlier that year, Christy had been conducting research in Japan, inviting Okinawans to engage with Gail's photographs and narrate their experiences of postwar change. Recognizing that Okinawans in the diaspora could also offer insight into the postwar years, he visited the OAA office in Gardena and spoke to leaders there about ways they could collaborate. Christy was invited to help organize the OAA archive, for which he identified funding and recruited student workers. Organizing and cataloging such an archive would be an important contribution to the larger project of amplifying Okinawan voices and history, which have long been subsumed under the Japanese perspective. For example, on the contentious issue of U.S. military bases in Japan, a quarter of which are stationed in Okinawa, the distinctiveness of the Okinawan experience is often erased. The bases face serious opposition from local Okinawans, but are supported by successive Japanese national governments as an important part of the U.S. contribution to Japanese defense. As such, tension exists between the Japanese government and Okinawans on the urgency of addressing and potentially removing these bases from Okinawa.

## Doing History Outside the Classroom

The project has provided an opportunity for students to work with primary sources and participate in the production of history as a form of social and communal memory. Christy, with support from the Henry Luce Foundation, has hired 15 undergraduates to work on the project. Several graduate students have been involved with the project since its inception and Christy plans to add seven more by December. Between 2018 and 2021, the project focused mainly on digitizing OAA's archival material. In the coming months, students will continue working on digitization, as well as begin in-person work to organize materials and engage the community in oral history. Student involvement in the project outside of formal coursework has been meaningful to Christy, as he believes it offers a space of deep learning that is not tied to or incentivized by a grade. Rather, the emphasis is placed on building relationships and the students' abilities to engage deeply and meaningfully with the OAA community.

## Future Directions

In July 2021, the UCSC team visited Gardena for an in-person gathering organized by the OAA to meet with OAA community members and discuss the project's future directions. One of initiative's immediate objectives is to conduct oral histories with the OAA community using Gail's photographs, from which the team will build an archive and an exhibit. The team hopes that such an archive can potentially serve as a template for other Okinawan associations around the world. This hope is part of a larger vision for a collective, multilingual, multi-sited archive connecting diasporic Okinawan communities in California and Hawaii, for instance, to those in Brazil, Peru and Bolivia. Christy aims to develop a mode of service that entails serving with the community, rather than for them, by, for instance, supporting participation from the OAA's younger members and training them to conduct oral history and archival work alongside the team. It is his hope that the project develops a mode of service that entails serving with the community, rather than for them.

## Further Reading and Listening

Townsend, Peggy. "Seeking Okinawan Rights." *UC Santa Cruz News Center*, June 1, 2022.

<https://news.ucsc.edu/2022/06/mcclellan-ufugusuku-lex-un.html>

Kunihasa, Erica and Tori Toguchi. "Preserving History with the Okinawan Memories Initiative." *Shimanchu Podcast*, December 14, 2021. <https://www.shimanchupodcast.com/post/episode-6-preserving-history-with-the-okinawa-memories-initiative>

Follow the Okinawa Memories Initiative on Instagram, [here](#).



"We approach world history almost always from huge civilizational centers. As a historian, my goal is to reconceive world history as something that can be told not from big centers, but from small margins, and to think differently about how the world gets stitched together."

- Alan Christy

# Questions? Contact us.

**Okinawan Association of America**

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