

February 7, 2022

Dear Friends,

My mother passed away unexpectedly Saturday, February 12. This was also her 84th birthday. I have been thinking a lot about her life and if you are willing to read on, I would like to tell you about her- Naoko Yogi Wright- she was born in a small village on the tropical island of Okinawa in 1938. Okinawa is not really Japan and has its own story very different than Japan's. Okinawans say we are both 'a part of' Japan and 'apart' from Japan- more like Polynesia than Tokyo- an ancient trading post that blended many Asian traditions. That was my mother's world growing up- the 3rd oldest of 8 children. When our family comes together they are loud and happy, with conversations that go late into the night. If you knew the story of her generation of Okinawans, you would know they had much to talk about.

Below is the village of Nakagusuku public school group photo- 1952. That is my mother- Naoko-San- in the middle row, far left, leaning in. She is 14 and is incredibly proud because she had just been told she was the top student in her class, a permanent badge of honor. It is the only photo I have of her as a child. She told me it was taken the last day of the school year and unbeknownst to her, it would be the last day she would ever go to school-even though her education meant everything to her. Her older sister-Sumiko- died of malaria shortly after the photo was taken, and Naoko had to quit school to take her sister's job at a nearby army base cleaning barracks.



In Okinawa you are never far from the ocean and you are never far from a U.S. military base. We are famous for inventing karate, for people who live to be a 100 and as the site of the last great battle of



World War II. Approximately, 15,000 American soldiers died, 80,000 Japanese soldiers died, and an estimated 130,000 Okinawan men, women and children died- 1/3 of the island's population. Before the battle started, my grandfather was conscripted as a cook, but he deserted and took his family to the mountain caves to hide-that's the reason they survived. He and his brother snuck out every night to find food and water. His brother and sister-in-law would eventually die from diarrhea and dehydration in the cave, which they shared with 50 other starving, reeking souls, including my 7 year old mother. After 90 days, one out of every 3 Okinawans were dead. But my mother survived. Afterwards the family lived for 3 years in a refugee camp earning money doing the clean-up of 200,000 dead bodies, picking up the debris, and rebuilding countless destroyed buildings. They ate strange army rations like spam, and hand-outs of candy and popcorn from soldiers. When they were released, they started the long walk to their former home

only to be stopped by a barb wired fence. It was now an airfield for the U.S. Military. My grandfather's- "kameko-baka"- an Okinawan family tomb shaped like a turtle was now part of the base. To him this meant his parent's spirits would never find him again. He died when Naoko-san was 12. My grandmother- Hatsu- then sent my aunt Sumiko, and my uncle Kenmei to work on the base. Two cousins who had been orphaned in the war had been adopted and my grandmother was raising 10 children as a widow. When Sumiko died, Hatsu-san sent my mother to take her job at the base. Naoko's pride at being the best in her class did not last long. She never returned to school.

Scroll forward another decade and she had become a waitress at the base. She met a soldier who came from Detroit. They met clandestinely off base -away from Hatsu's village, because her family would not approve and away from the U.S. military which also would not approve. Their marriage and 2 children were kept a secret till he could be honorably discharged. Eventually the soldier took Naoko and the children to Detroit. She didn't speak the language, knew no one in this new world, and knew nothing of American culture except what the army base had taught her. She had never seen snow before. She told me it seemed magical when she first saw it falling from the sky. The loneliness was hard- but she adapted, learned English, made friends with neighbors who at first avoided the "strange" food she made, but ultimately recognized her amazing cooking. She raised her children, sending money home to her mother every month. She played records of Okinawan music, read Japanese magazines and Okinawan

newspapers her siblings mailed her, cooked goya and purple sweet potatoes when she could find them, and snacked on rice crackers, fish cakes and seaweed snacks. In 2014, forty-eight years after leaving Okinawa, her son went back to meet his surviving aunts and uncles and 20+ cousins -- after buying all the appropriate omiyage (travel gifts) -- so as not to embarrass Naoko-san. He went to the turtle-back tomb his uncle Kenmei, the eldest son had built, which now held Kenmei's bones and the bones of Naoko-san's parents. He lit incense and picnicked nearby with his cousins to remember them, the way Okinawans do. One night, the family rented the community center to hold a large party and some of his cousins did an "Eisa"- an Okinawan drum dance to welcome him and his family. He drank awamori, an Okinawan liquor more like vodka than sake, fermented from rice and rattlesnake venom. A cousin introduced him to his Uncle Kenju, whom Naoko called her #4 brother as numbers 1-3 had passed away so he was the oldest uncle now.

Kenju's eyes lit up as my cousin told him I was Naoko's son. He took my hand, and I briefly saw my mother in his eyes. My cousin translated as my uncle told me that he and I are actually brothers because Naoko-san raised him, even though she was just a child herself. He told me they always thought of her and forgave my father for taking her away. They used the money she sent to build a floor in their house, and to install plumbing. They were eventually able to buy a neighborhood convenience store where all the family worked. They were no longer poor thanks to Naoko. All the younger children finished school and one of the adopted cousins became a Dean at the University of the Ryukyus -- the first college ever built in Okinawa. Kenju-san looked directly at me the whole time he was speaking -- he wanted to make sure I heard every word.

At the end of his story, he bowed his head, then looked up and using English for the first time, he said "Please tell your mother I said 'thank you for my life.'"

Dear Naoko-san, I hope now you are sitting on a sandy beach gazing at a sunset over warm turquoise waters, pointing at the waves with Dad, Sumiko, Kenmei and Hatsu, laughing and talking on a warm Okinawa night with a soft breeze stirring the palm trees.

Thank you for my life as well, Mom. I love you. You taught me about responsibility, sacrifice, honesty and kindness. I will miss you dearly.

Robert O Wright MD MPH
Ethel H Wise Professor and Chair
Department of Environmental Medicine & Public Health
Director, Institute for Exposomic Research