



Russell Tabata is proud to carry on the legacy of the UMKC Hawaii alumni association.



Word of mouth

The Aloha State's dedication to the UMKC School of Dentistry earns its alumni the Chancellor's Medal

by LINDSEY V. COREY

If you asked six-year-old Tina Mukai what she wanted to be when she grew up, she would always answer “a dentist.”

More than 20 years later, she's all grown up and working in a dental clinic at home in Hawaii.

“My mom was a hygienist so she brainwashed me to say I was going to be a dentist instead of all those things little girls usually want to be,” says Mukai (D.D.S. '07). “It just might have worked because once I was getting close to graduating from high school, all I knew was that I wanted to help people, and dentistry kept coming up as the best way for me to do that.”

Mom had a role in making that happen, too. Kay Mukai had taken her dental hygiene skills and insights on the road as a sales rep for Crest and Oral B. Her position introduced her to dentists throughout Hawaii, and she introduced her daughter to those professionals, most of them UMKC School of Dentistry graduates like Russell Tabata (D.D.S. '67).

Tina Mukai remembers her first visit to Tabata's office. Like the hundreds of other potential UMKC students he's volunteered to interview, Mukai listened intently as Tabata proudly told her about his alma mater's history, sharing the stories passed on to him by older Japanese American alumni.

“It all started during the war, World War II, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor,” Tabata explains. “All the Japanese Americans had to leave their dental schools on the West Coast; they were left with no place to go. But Dean [Roy] Rinehart said he'd take them in. In those days, that wasn't the most popular thing to do, and that took a lot of courage. He basically saved them from the internment camps.”

One report shows how far Rinehart would go to help them. In the early 1940s, Rinehart traveled to California to sign papers releasing a young evacuee from a detention camp and then drove him to Kansas City for class.

“Just imagine how families felt about that,” Tabata says. “Naturally, word spread in Hawaii about how this school in the Midwest welcomed people no matter what their background.”

Generations later, Mukai was moved.

“It means a lot to us,” she says. “My grandpa and grandma were in internment camps so it definitely hits closer to home. And learning the history reinforces the fact that UMKC is a special place that's never judged us or anyone else because of race.”

Neil Furuya, D.D.S. '87, said the dental school's faculty and staff have always had a tradition of welcoming and nurturing its diverse student population.

“It didn't matter where you came from,” says the Honolulu native. “They genuinely care about all the students whether they're from New Mexico or Arkansas or Hawaii. They're good to all their kids up there. It's not just about what you learn, but also how you're treated. You can't help but be grateful for that.”

And so the reputation continues to flourish on Hawaii's islands, where there is no dental school. Since the 1940s, UMKC's School of Dentistry has accepted two or three Hawaiian students a year to its competitive and small classes. Most of them return home upon graduation to practice and continue their relationships with fellow alumni as part of the association's active Hawaiian contingent.

The alumni group got its start in the 1940s with Tabata's father Ichiro Tabata, a 1938 UMKC dental school graduate. He and other area alumni wanted to thank Rinehart for his support so they pooled their money to treat him to a trip to Hawaii.

Before his death in 1996, George Tanaka (D.D.S. '49), said, “We felt the dean trusted us, and it was our job to prove to him that we would not fail him ... and the fact that he took a chance on me, I appreciate.”

“It’s just a feeling you get when you meet people from UMKC. You see how much they enjoyed themselves, so it’s not about saying ‘my school is better’ as much as just sharing their story.” -Brandon Yokota

After Ichiro Tabata’s death in 1970, Tanaka led the Hawaiian alumni association in recruiting students and returned to Kansas City annually to teach in the clinics.

“Dr. Tanaka started all this,” Tabata says. “I’m just a little potato compared to him. If he were alive, I know he’d still be running the show. He set the bar high, and we’ve tried to continue his efforts.”

This spring, Tabata will accept the Chancellor’s Medal, UMKC’s highest non-academic honor, on behalf of the School of Dentistry’s Hawaiian alumni association. Given at the Chancellor’s discretion, the medal honors those who have shown UMKC unwavering support.

The Hawaiian alumni association’s members range in age from their 20s to 80s. They plan professional development opportunities and scholarship fundraisers, regularly host gatherings for current and prospective students as well as parents, and have welcomed School of Dentistry Dean Michael Reed, D.D.S., to the islands each of his 23 years at UMKC.

Furuya arranges for Reed to meet with the 25-member University of Hawaii Pre-dental Club, for which he’s been a volunteer adviser for seven years. He also invites alumni from other dental schools to speak with the prospective students and helps them with their applications.

“It’s important that they get good first-hand exposure to different schools,” Furuya says. “But after they hear from everyone, over and over these kids choose Kansas City as their No. 1 choice, so I’m confident UMKC is getting the best students from Hawaii.”

Reed agrees, saying he wishes he could admit more Hawaiian students.

“There’s a steady stream of highly qualified Hawaiian candidates coming here,” he says. “And it’s because of the incredible alumni push and knowing when they go home, they won’t be alone and will have all the help they need. Each one of our alums goes back with a wonderfully refreshing attitude, and that gives us that extra step in attracting these students.”

Brandon Yokota, D.D.S. ’03, says meeting UMKC alumni was all it took for him to make his selection.

“There’s just a feeling you get when you meet people from that school,” he says. “You see how much they enjoyed themselves so it’s not about saying ‘my school is better’ so much as just sharing their story. Dr. [Dan] Tira [School of Dentistry professor emeritus] and Dr. Tabata had a huge influence on me. They were so nice and caring that it just felt right.”

Reed says every applicant from Hawaii has met Tabata. And, as with all accepted students he has interviewed, Tabata stayed in touch with Yokota during his years at the University.

Tabata had never been to the mainland when he was accepted to UMKC. So his father’s classmate Richard T. Oliver, D.D.S. ’38, suggested he fly to Tulsa, Okla. He put him up for two nights and drove Tabata to Kansas City, where Oliver stayed for a few days to ensure Tabata had everything he needed to start the semester.

By going out of his way to help a new student, Oliver made a big impression on Tabata, so he ensures the tradition continues today.

“When I talk to other students, I realize how lucky we are to have this connection,” Mukai says. “He’s so involved and is always reaching out to us and encouraging us to be involved.”

Tabata notifies current Hawaiian students any time a prospective student from their state will be visiting the Hospital Hill campus. Mukai and Yokota remember getting rides from the airport, being invited to plays and dinners, and having students help them find housing. One particular Kansas City apartment complex has often been home to Hawaiian dental students, who for years have passed their leases on to incoming students upon their graduations.



Above, from left to right: Past Hawaiian alumni association presidents Ichiro Tabata and George Tanaka; former Dean Roy Rinehart.

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Graduate Tina Mukai now works in a dental clinic in her native Hawaii.

“It’s funny how we’ve pretty much taken over this place,” Mukai says. “The people in the Midwest are so nice and genuine, and we’ve always felt a connection to them because they create a laid-back atmosphere that reminds us of home. Adjusting is hard, and you miss home, so it’s really nice to have a community of people who understand. We take care of each other.”

Those relationships continue at home in Hawaii.

“You appreciate the opportunity and the history behind it, so in turn, when you graduate, you want to give back,” Yokota says. “When I came home, it wasn’t something Dr. Tabata had to ask, it’s just something you do now that you’re an alum.

“That’s what has kept this alive for so long. There’s always been a good group of people who are truly grateful to have been at UMKC and that experience keeps everything going.”

Tabata recently attended a dental conference where a graduate of another dental school said he was envious of the UMKC alumni group.

“He said, ‘I went to a fine school and all, but if I’d known about this, I would have gone to UMKC,’” Tabata says. “He told me he was envious of how close we are and how much fun we have, so I told him we’d take him. The word of mouth is so positive here, you even hear it from people from other schools.”

Tabata says nearly all recent UMKC dentistry graduates return to Hawaii and become active in the state’s UMKC alumni association.

“Students start to realize that a close-knit alumni group is really a big asset,” he says.

“There are a lot of networking opportunities once you get home. It’s not totally on purpose, but it just so happens that UMKC people are good clinicians so it’s fairly easy to refer to each other. I trust that I can send my patients to them because they’re the very best. My patients are my No. 1 priority, but fortunately most UMKC graduates are very capable and nice.”

Tabata found that to be especially true of Yokota, whom he invited to become a partner in his private practice in January. The Honolulu practice was originally operated by Tabata’s father.

“Over the years, I found him to be very dependable, and always there ready to help,” Tabata says. “I felt he was an honest person and really wanted to do the right thing for people. That’s how I like things done.”

Yokota was flattered by the proposal from the person who had once recommended him for admission to UMKC’s School of Dentistry.

“We’ve become really close, so I wasn’t sure I wanted to go and change things by mixing business and friendship,” Yokota says. “But then I thought of how I’d be working with my mentor. I’d be stupid to turn that down, and it just felt right. Now, it’s hard to imagine where I’d be if I hadn’t met Dr. Tabata.”

That same debt of gratitude is what Tabata feels for his predecessor, Dr. Tanaka. “He is the person really responsible for what our alumni group is today,” Tabata says. “George Tanaka was our mentor and the visionary of the UMKC Hawaiian dental alumni association. We are all just carrying on his vision.”

Chancellor's Medal

The UMKC Hawaiian dental alumni delegation will be honored during a 75th anniversary commemorative luncheon on Oct. 2 on the UMKC campus. On Feb. 13, 2009, the Chancellor's Medal will officially be presented to the Hawaiian dental alumni at a ceremony in Hawaii.