

# ALBERT OKURA DEAD at 71

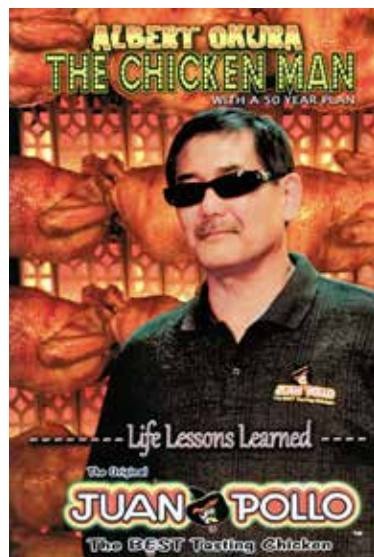
The entrepreneur founded Juan Pollo restaurant.

By P.C. Staff

‘My destiny in life is to sell more chicken than anyone in the world.’

That affirmation by restaurateur Albert Ryo Okura from his book “Albert Okura The Chicken Man: With a 50 Year Plan” may not have simply been his goal — it may have actually summed up his life’s purpose.

Okura, whose youthful obsession for all things fast-food



Okura’s book was a combination memoir, guide for entrepreneurs and promotional item.

— burgers, tacos and, of course, chicken — inspired him to cross the road from restaurant employee to restaurant entrepreneur and found the Juan Pollo restaurant chain, died Jan. 27 in Ontario, Calif. He was 71. (See related article, “The Man Who Would Be Chicken King,” in the June 1, 2018, *Pacific Citizen*.)

The Juan Pollo restaurant chain would expand to 25 restaurants, most located in Southern California’s Riverside and San Bernardino counties, with a much smaller number in Los Angeles and Orange counties.

Born and raised in the Los Angeles suburb of Wilmington, Calif., Okura was the second-born child of Chiyoko and Tsuyoshi Okura, who raised him and three siblings, older brother Robert and younger sisters Amy and Susan.

In his aforementioned memoir/marketing tool, copies of which he sometimes gave away for free, Okura recalled how, growing up in the 1950s and ’60s, his love of fast food grew in lockstep with the postwar growth of the many then-young chains such as McDonald’s, Burger King, Taco Bell, A&W, Der Wienerschnitzel, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Foster’s Freeze and In-N-Out. “I loved all

these new restaurants,” he wrote in his book. “What a great time for someone like me.”

Although Okura would later work and train at Burger King and Del Taco, and eventually, with his brother-in-law Armando Parra, focus on perfecting a recipe and method for cooking the rotisserie chickens that would become the foundation of the Juan Pollo restaurant chain he founded in 1984, it was McDonald’s that would, according to his book, “have a huge affect [sic] on my life.”

For example, the San Bernardino, Calif., headquarters for Juan Pollo is also the site of the original McDonald’s restaurant, which Okura in 1998 bought when it was in foreclosure — and turned it into an admission-free (and unauthorized) museum dedicated to McDonald’s history and memorabilia. It was a tribute to the chain and Ray Kroc, the man who bought out the original McDonald brothers and grew it into one of the world’s greatest food (and real estate) empires.

It remains an endeavor that the McDonald’s corporation wishes would quietly go away, but its existence and popularity was a point of pride for Okura, who never let a marketing opportu-



Albert Okura proudly displays Juan Pollo’s rotisserie chicken and sides in this 2018 photo taken at one of his restaurants in San Bernardino, Calif.

PHOTO: GEORGE TOSHIO JOHNSTON

nity, no matter how wacky, go unexploited. On the topic of real estate, another example of his innate marketing genius was his purchase of the town of Amboy, Calif., a mostly forgotten outpost along the historic Route 66.

Not only was it inspired by a mentor who lamented not buying an actual town when he had the opportunity, the purchase, like that of the original McDonald’s restaurant, garnered free news coverage that also put the Juan Pollo chain into the spotlight.

For Okura, it was all about the chicken — make that “the best tasting chicken,” a phrase he trademarked — that would become his focus from age 32,



Posters for Okura’s celebration of life, held on Feb. 11 in the City of Industry, Calif.

PHOTO: PHYLLIS HAYASHIBARA

when he founded his first Juan Pollo, also in Ontario, Calif.

Okura was predeceased by his parents. He is survived by his wife, Sella; sons, Kyle and Aaron, and daughter, Chloe; siblings, Robert Okura, Amy (Ray) Pong and Susan (Andy) Hoffman; and a niece and a nephew. ■

# ASIAN AMERICAN JOURNALISTS YEE, HAGIHARA DIE

Both were associated with the *Los Angeles Times*.

By P.C. Staff

A pair of journalists associated with the *Los Angeles Times* — Gregory Yee, who had been actively employed there, and Randy Hagihara, who was retired, have died. Yee, 33, died Jan. 4 in Los Angeles. Hagihara, 72, died Jan. 7 in Huntington Beach, Calif.

The Los Angeles Chapter of the Asian American Journalists Assn. issued a statement that said, “Greg was a friend to many at the *Times* and beyond. He was taken much too soon, and his young age betrays the impact he had in his newsrooms.”

A University of California, Irvine graduate, Yee served as editor-in-chief of the student newspaper. He joined the *Times* in 2021, working on the paper’s Fast Break desk. Prior to that, he was a working journalist in New Mexico, Long Beach, Calif., and South Carolina.

According to the Los Angeles *Times*, Yee’s survivors attributed his death to complications from a respiratory issue. He is survived

by his father, Andrew, his mother, Mirta, and sisters Halina Yee and Emma Yee.

The AAJA and the *L.A. Times* are planning to begin a scholarship in Yee’s honor that will focus on skills development and training opportunities.

Hagihara, who began his stint at the *Times* in 1990, would spend more than 20 years at the paper before retiring in 2011. During his time at the paper, he was the senior editor of recruitment and in charge of what was then known as Metpro, its minority-recruitment program.

Said AAJA Board President Nicole Dungca: “Without leaders like Randy paving the way for younger generations of AAPI journalists, AAJA and so many of its members would not be where we are today. While he will be dearly missed for his empathy, eagle-eyed edits and quick wit, his legacy lives on in the journalists who have learned from Randy himself to pay it forward.”

Regarding Hagihara’s tenure running Metpro at the *Times*, his colleague, Craig Matsuda, told the *Pacific Citizen*: “He employed an unerring eye, reading — really studying — the jobs materials submitted to him. He did not care what schools candidates attended, nor what the size or prestige of their recent employers. He pushed to advance careers of notably inclusive candidates, women and men, Black, brown, white, of Asian descent, regardless of sexual orientation. He loved discovering folks overlooked by others — and he did, for decades.”

Born and raised in Los Angeles, Hagihara graduated from Roosevelt High School in Boyle Heights before serving in the Air Force for four years. His entrée into a career in journalism came by way of working with Sacramento, Calif.-based investigative journalist K. W. Lee.

According to Matsuda, “Randy Hagihara put together a remarkable life and career, which is best

understood by looking at its three professional parts.” The first part saw Hagihara join Lee and his fellow *Sacramento Union* staffer Steve Chanecka on Lee’s ahead-of-the-curve startup newspaper, *Koreatown Weekly*, the nation’s first English-language weekly.

Based in L.A.’s Koreatown, it aimed to cover the growing Korean American community (see *Pacific Citizen*, June 15, 2018). The enterprise lasted five years. At a 2018 event reuniting the paper’s staff, Hagihara recalled

details like trapping mice at the *Koreatown Weekly*’s office. “To me, working with Lee and Chanecka was the most fun I ever had in journalism, and I was lucky enough to realize it at the time,” Hagihara said.

According to Matsuda, the second part of Hagihara’s career began after *Koreatown Weekly* folded. “Hagihara then worked for traditional newspapers, many

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