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*Ken Kashiwahara
Signs Off*

Kashiwahara Signs Off With ABC News

Veteran Newsmen Began His Broadcast Career in Hawaii

As Ken Kashiwahara looked around his ABC News office in San Francisco for the last time, there was a look of determination and sadness in his eyes.

“I’m getting rid of 20 years worth of stuff,” he said. “I was really looking forward to retirement, but when the day actually comes, it’s really a different mental state.”

At the end of the day, with the assistance of his wife, Lupita, and their niece, Karmella, Kashiwahara loaded the family car with scripts and videotapes and drove away.

ABC’s San Francisco news bureau has officially closed its doors. Kashiwahara has handed in his resignation, ending almost a quarter of a century association with the network.

“I said to myself, for the first time in 35 years, I don’t have a job,” Kashiwahara said. “I’m unemployed. It’s a strange kind of feeling.”

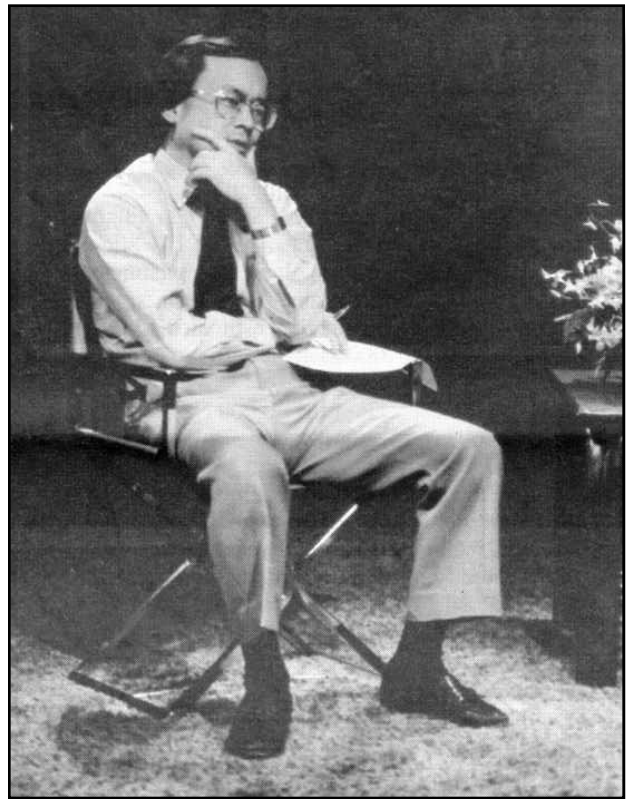
“I got to the point where I wasn’t enjoying it anymore. I had done everything that there was to do. I think I was getting burned out.”

His wife Lupita was more specific. She said, “It came time for him to go, because he was starting to have headaches. When the phone rang, he was not happy anymore. When he did a story and it would not see air, that was very frustrating. It was building up.

“For the newcomers in the business, it’s very glamorous. It’s very nice. But after a while, how many hotel rooms can you stay in? How many evenings can you be alone? Dinners by yourself? It takes its toll.”

Recently, the 58-year-old correspondent flew to New York with his family to finalize this long-thought-out decision. During a broadcast, ABC News anchor Peter Jennings introduced a feature story that Kashiwahara had put together and at the end of the newscast, bid him farewell.

“I was stunned that they did that,” Kashiwahara said. “Normally they don’t do that unless a correspondent dies.”



“Peter threw a party in my honor at his home. A lot of nice things were said, and it made me feel emotional.”

Lupita added, “I was just in tears. I felt pride inside. He has shown his colleagues that you can be successful, you can do a good story without having to put out fires every second of the day.”

Kashiwahara was one of the first Asian Americans to become a television network correspondent. A reporter and television anchorman in his native Hawaii before becoming a newscaster in Los Angeles, Kashiwahara joined ABC News in November 1974.

As he looks back at his career, Kashiwahara has fond memories of his early beginnings in Honolulu. While honing his reportorial skills, he worked as a capitol reporter during the day and anchored at night.

“I started at KHVH radio, spent about six months there, and moved immediately into anchoring on television in 1969,” he said. “I knew nothing about television. I was terrible! I think it took me about a year to be comfortable

there. But that's where I learned everything in terms of practical training on the job. We had to do everything. (Kashiwahara was also associated with KGMB-TV, the CBS affiliate in Hawaii)."

As a reporter, Kashiwahara enjoyed the "small town" atmosphere, because he could feel the pulse of the community.

"You can really see, hear and feel the impact of your reporting as opposed to being in a bigger city where your reports are going on the air, and you never hear about what's happening."

One of the reports that stands out in his "Best of Kashiwahara stories," was a news exclusive on the underworld.

"I broke a story on the Mafia coming to Hawaii. The next morning I dropped by a gasoline station. This guy had seen it and talked about it. It was great feedback," Kashiwahara said.

He added, "It was a little scary. I was a brand new reporter (29 years old). It was something to have these tough guys look at me when I gave a deposition. I was sued, but the judge threw it out."

When he moved to Los Angeles, Kashiwahara set his sights on new challenges.

"I was in Los Angeles, working for KABC-TV, and my goal was to get to the network," he said. "I hung around the network a lot. I even did some stories for them while I was at the local station. Bill McSherry was the bureau chief then. He knew I wanted to work for the network and contacted the people in New York. When an opening came up, he recommended me, and they hired me."

It wasn't long before Kashiwahara was covering one of the biggest stories in his life.

"March of 1975, I was asked to go to Vietnam. I don't know why. That was sort of [to get] network experience. They wouldn't do that today. I was a brand new correspondent. This was a huge story. Vietnam was collapsing.

"Frankly, I wasn't thrilled about going. I didn't know what I was doing, and they were shooting people. I'm glad that I did. I covered history in the making."

Hillary Brown and Kashiwahara were the last of a stable of ABC correspondents in Vietnam before Saigon fell.

According to Kashiwahara, those were harrowing moments. The streets of Saigon were flooded

with people trying to flee the city. Angry eyes glared as busloads of Americans tried to make their way to evacuation points.

"We drove around the city for four hours, not knowing where to go," Kashiwahara recounted. "We decided to go down to the Port of Saigon at one point to try to get on a boat to get out, but it was the same thing. It was absolutely mobbed. We all got off the bus. We saw that all of the Vietnamese were trying to get on the boats, too. We decided to leave."

That almost didn't happen for Kashiwahara. He continued, "The bus started pulling away. As I started running towards the bus, the Vietnamese mob just grabbed the shoulder straps to my pack and pulled me back. I looked back at their faces; they were really mad. I just let everything go.

"I ran and got on the bus. It was one of the most tragic things that happened to me that day. A Vietnamese man with a baby comes running alongside the opened door. He said, 'My baby. My baby. Take my baby!' He trips and falls. The baby falls under the bus and the bus runs over the baby. All of us in the bus were stunned."

The journalists then drove to the American Embassy, which was surrounded by a mob of Vietnamese. Panic was in the air. Kashiwahara and his colleagues pushed their way to the wall, lined with U.S. Marines. He said to himself, "This has happened to me before in Vietnam. They'll think I'm Vietnamese. Are they going to give me the boot right in the face? I thought to myself: What am I going to do? If they try to kick me down, I'm going to say, 'I'm from Los Angeles, and the Dodgers won the pennant.'"

"As they were pulling the journalists up, I squeezed myself between two white faces. I reached my hand out and watched if I was going to get a foot in my face, but a Marine just grabbed my hand and pulled me up. I was quite relieved. We waited a few hours and finally got on a helicopter and got out of there."

After the journalists landed safely on board the aircraft carrier *USS Hancock*, frustration sank in. They were sitting on the hottest story with no way of communicating it to anyone in the world. But fate intervened and gave Kashiwahara a helping hand. By a lucky draw,

he and a *Time* magazine photographer were chosen to fly to Clark Field in the Philippines to deliver the film for everyone.

Hours after his arrival, Kashiwahara was ushered into a television studio in Manila. Newsreel footage was transmitted by satellite to New York. ABC anchorman Harry Reasoner was ready to debrief him. Kashiwahara said, "When the satellite came up, I couldn't hear him. Something was wrong. I hadn't slept for two days. I was tired. Upset. Finally, someone from New York said, 'Start talking.'"

"I talked for about five or six minutes about what happened in the last days in Saigon. I mentioned when I was on the carrier, I learned the United States had abandoned 400 people in the embassy courtyard, people who had worked for us; we just left them there. Kissinger called me a liar, but as it turned out, I was right."

Following his tour in Vietnam, Kashiwahara served as bureau chief in Hong Kong for three years, covering such stories as the deaths of Mao Tse Tung, Chou En Lai, the exile of Deng Xio Peng, and the boatloads of refugees still trying to escape from Vietnam.

On his return to the states, he settled in the San Francisco Bay Area. He was at the first space shuttle launch, followed Ronald Reagan on his 1980 presidential campaign, did the last interview with mountaineer Harry Truman days before Mount St. Helens erupted, and covered the 1989 San Francisco Bay Area earthquake. His assignments also took him around the world.

He remembers a close call while covering the civil war in Lebanon.

"The Christians had bombed the Beirut airport and cut off all communications and food supply lines," Kashiwahara recounted. "My crew and I ran out there to cover the rockets landing at the airport. One of them hit a commercial jetliner right next to us and shrapnel was raining all over me. I looked across the tarmac and saw my crew on the ground. I thought they were dead. That's not a good feeling. At that point, I thought, it's not worth it. We got out of there fast."

Kashiwahara feels closest to the stories that have made a difference in people's lives. One was a story about a 200-year-old law signed by George Washington that was used by white

fishermen to bar Vietnamese from casting their nets off the coast of California.

"After I did the story, one of the attorneys representing the fishermen said that some members of Congress saw the story and proceeded to change the law to allow the Vietnamese to fish."

Another involved the effort to win redress for Japanese Americans who were interned in World War II and the debate over whether or not racism was a factor in putting them into the camps.

"I got a tip that there was a memo sitting in the National Archives in Washington, a memo written by Franklin Roosevelt in 1936, which talked about interning Japanese and Japanese Americans. That's extremely significant, because that was five years before the war began and he was already talking about putting them into internment camps," Kashiwahara said.

"The excuse for putting them in the internment camps, after the war started, was because they were engaged in espionage and sabotage and they were security risks, which was, of course, not true."

When Kashiwahara suggested the story, he was greeted with resistance.

"I thought this was a very significant story, but the executive editor didn't think so. I had to argue and convince him to put it on the air. After I put it on the air, he called me and said, 'Thank you. You were right.' There it was in black and white. Certainly it lends credence to the charge that the internment was racially motivated."

A story that Kashiwahara still thinks about today like a haunting dream is the 1983 assassination of his brother-in-law, exiled political leader Benigno Aquino, who returned to Manila to challenge the presidential rule of Ferdinand Marcos. The Aquino family commemorated the 15th anniversary of that tragedy on August 21.

Aquino was shot and killed as he was escorted off the plane by Marcos's security guards while the rest of the passengers, including Kashiwahara, were kept on board a jetliner.

"I took a vacation to go with him because we thought a family member ought to be with him on this journey of his. But I wasn't covering it. I became a news *maker*, which was very awkward

for me. After the assassination, all of these reporters asked me, 'What happened?' I said, 'I can't talk about it.' In my mind, I was still a journalist. I'm not supposed to be a news *maker*, so I wouldn't talk with them for awhile."

But those moments are burned in his mind.

"It was a mob scene. We had followed him (Aquino) out the door to the tube right down to the ramp. That's when the security guards blocked us all in. I didn't see anything, but I heard the shots. I ran back into the plane and looked out the window to see if I could see him, but they had already removed his body. All this in less than two minutes.

"It was the most traumatic experience of my life. I was absolutely devastated. I had never dreamed that they would do this at the airport in broad daylight. I was angry. I was shaking. I broke down and cried." I couldn't look at the spot where he was shot. I didn't want to go back into that terminal again. Fifteen years later, I look at it from the point of view, he didn't die in vain; he started Marcos' downfall."

As he tossed an empty videotape box into a trash can, Kashiwahara said he had no regrets about his career, and he would "do it all over again the same way."

"If I look back 25 years, lots of things have really changed and gotten better," Kashiwahara said. "What we see now on the air are mostly Asian American women. I don't know how we will solve that problem. There are a few men. James Hattori is at CNN now. He was at CBS. It would be nice to have more Asian American males."

Kashiwahara would also like the national media to consider doing more stories involving Asian Americans.

"I don't think it's registered except for the campaign fund-raising scandal. At the network level, I think there should be more emphasis and interest in Asia, but there's not any more. I think it's true for all of the networks. We have really cut back our foreign coverage."

"It's ratings. They don't think Americans care about things that happen overseas," he says.

Has Kashiwahara ended his broadcasting career? He has already turned down overtures from NBC and CNN, and he plans to take the

rest of the year off before he considers what he will do next.

His wife Lupita feels this will be precious time for the two of them.

She believes the business will miss him.

With pride, she said, "He's a rare breed of broadcast journalist. He puts soul into his stories. He puts in character. He's very sensitive to his fellow man. He doesn't shout; he doesn't get angry unless there's an injustice.



"He's been a 'Dear Abby' to his colleagues who had broken hearts. He has a secret yearning to have a second career to be a priest. He's a Catholic. He converted five years ago. He has found spirituality, and he wants to change the world. He wants to live the gospel. That's one of the reasons why he retired."

Kashiwahara is considering at least one idea that might reconnect him with broadcast journalism and fulfill that dream of "living the gospel." He said, "Dennis Trout, who used to be an ABC correspondent, is forming a foundation to do news stories on issues and subjects that make a difference, which he thinks are no longer being covered by the networks or the local stations. His idea is to get grants of money and go do stories on the environment, on poverty, on meaningful issues—and give them to local stations across the country. Free. Send them on the satellite. He's asked me to join his board."

"Will I miss what I've been doing?" Kashiwahara asked. "I don't know. You don't know until you try it."

Television Program Note:

“Prejudice and Patriotism,” a new television documentary produced by a San Francisco Bay Area group and narrated by Ken Kashiwahara, will soon be released. The program, which was funded by the Civil Liberties Public Education Fund, is the first of a two-part story about the Japanese American internment and the important role Japanese Americans played in the Military Intelligence Service to help America win the war in the Pacific. The program features interviews with former internees, MIS veterans, retired General Collin Powell and U. S. Senator Daniel Akaka of Hawaii.

For more information on the program, write to the National Japanese American Historical Society (NJAHS), 22 Peace Plaza, Suite 225, San Francisco, CA 94115-3611 or call them at (415) 921-5007, or by fax, (415) 921-5087.

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