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APRIL 25, 2007 - 10:21 A.M.

Posted: Saturday, Dec 30, 2006 - 11:20:52 pm HST

ARCHIVES

Michael on my heart

Posted: Saturday, Dec 30, 2006 - 11:20:52 pm HST

On Dec. 19, shortly after returning to Hawai'i from Nepal, where he was working as an independent journalist, D. Michael Van De Veer died from an infection from which he could not recover. An active member of South Asian Journalists Association, Van De Veer was a long-time social activist around the world and best known as the colorful and compassionate voice of KKCR's weekly "Out of the Box" call-in talk show.

by Jon Letman

Today, the day of the winter solstice, the seventh night of Chanukah, I was in my kitchen, preparing lunch for my 2-year-old son while listening to KKCR, as I do on most Thursdays mornings.

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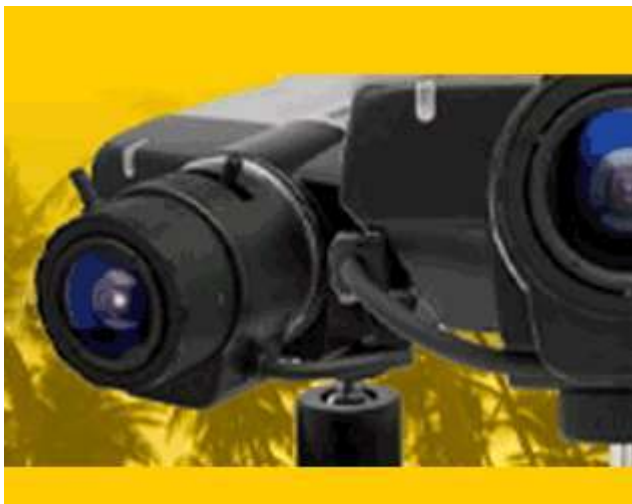
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I was half-listening to the opening of the show when I caught the words, "...sorry to say that our colleague, Michael Van De Veer, passed away this week upon his return from Asia."

The words registered, but something they were unreal, like the reading of a bad script that should be crumpled up and thrown away. It didn't make sense. Michael ... passed away?

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D. Michael Van De Veer, long-time host and KKCR radio personality, died on Dec. 19 at the age of 62. According to Brodie, Michael had recently returned from Asia and was immediately admitted to Queen's Medical Center in Honolulu. After several days, his condition worsened and on Dec. 19, he passed from this world.



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Michael was not just a disc jockey or radio talk host. He did not simply play music, make witty remarks and offer the odd bit of commentary. Far from it.

His show, indeed every time he hit the airwaves, was a call to action, a cry for justice and a shout for peace now. Politically, Michael was, as one deejay put it, "left of Lenin." But it went far beyond being liberal or progressive or pro-this or anti-that. Michael could perhaps better be described as a heart-reader and an engaged listener.

"Out of the Box," as he and co-host Michele Morouse described it, was "closet-free radio, the answer to the New World Order." Michael answered each call asking, "Aloha, what's on your heart?"

The Chinese character "xin," what the Japanese read "kokoro," means "heart" as well as "mind," a connection Michael drew when he asked what was on people's hearts.

"What's on your heart, sister?" was Michael's way of initiating thoughtful discussions, flowing dialogue, insightful commentary and, on many occasions, robust debate. Argument, put-downs or insults, however, were never part of Michael's show. He was not a practitioner of belittlement, degradation or verbal punches. Michael was respectful, compassionate and always tried to distinguish between an ideology, political philosophy or practice and the very real human being behind it, no matter who that might be.

This is not to say Michael was soft, subtle, dispassionate or weak. He wasn't.

For anyone who knew Michael or, like me, was an avid listener and admirer (but disinclined to call in), they knew Michael was pro-community involvement, pro-peace and pro-humanity. He was a vociferous advocate of communication, understanding, tolerance, acceptance and compassion.

With a passion and balance not often heard in talk radio, Michael sought a better world and encouraged listeners to do the same. Michael was concerned about his home on Kaua'i and what he saw as overdevelopment, a lack of affordable housing, political corruption and the good of the few outweighing the well being of the many.

He railed against militarism, social injustice, racism, xenophobia, corporate greed, rampant mindless development, environmental destruction, hypocrisy, lies, mind-control, wars of all size and shape and much of what has been waged in the name of "freedom" and "democracy" since 2001.

"Out of the Box," as hosted by Michael and Michele, was always a lively place where anyone could call in, speak up or shout out about local, national or international issues or anything that was on their heart. Michael's callers included members of the community, local and state politicians, visiting tourists as well as national figures like Amy Goodman, Howard Zinn and Ralph Nader.

On KKCR, Hawai'i's only full-powered, community-based, listener-supported, non-commercial radio station, Michael's presence and contribution were huge and his ideas and approach were cloaked comfortably in his distinctive, thick southern accent, which was impossible to ignore and unlikely to be forgotten.

But as large as his presence in radio was, Michael was also very active as a journalist, writing and reporting for Pacifica's Free Speech Radio News, UnitedWeBlog — Voice of Democratic Nepal and other independent news outlets. An active member of SAJA (South Asian Journalists Association), Michael frequently traveled to and wrote about social and political affairs in Nepal.

A KKCR Web site biography notes that Michael was a former Peace Corps volunteer in Liberia and the former planning director of Santa Cruz County, Calif. Michael served on KKCR's Board of Directors and was active in supporting charitable causes in Nepal.

It was Michael's message, his passion and his involvement in community and international media that prompted me to approach him for an interview. Last May I e-mailed Michael, asking if he would meet me for an interview when he returned

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from Nepal.

In his response from Kathmandu, Michael wrote that he was a “very private person off-air,” explaining that he declined many social invitations. He said that he would like to speak, but didn’t think there was enough for a profile article.

“I’m off to cover the revolution,” he closed, adding, “Peace and Justice, for without Justice there will never be Peace.”

Intrigued by Michael as an independent journalist, I asked for an interview a second time and was answered with what read like a terse all caps response: “I DO NOT WANT TO DO AN INTERVIEW, AND WILL NOT CALL YOU!! THANKS, BUT NO THANKS.”

I wrote back, apologizing for the disturbance and wished Michael good luck.

In his reply, still in Nepal, Michael explained that he had no intention to be hostile and apologized if that is how he came off. Michael proceeded to share very personal insight into his philosophy of journalism and why he does not seek attention. An interview, he said, would not shed any more light, just more notoriety.

“Who knows, maybe we will run into each other or break bread,” he wrote.

The e-mail closed, “If you can please not be offended and know I love you even though we haven’t met ... I cannot think of anyone I hate ... peace, Michael.”

That was May 2006, the month Michael returned from Nepal to Kaua’i and continued to host “Out of the Box.” Each Thursday, I continued listening, wondering if we would, indeed, one day meet. On Kaua’i, I figured it was likely.

Then, last September, out of nowhere I received a brief e-mail in which Michael wrote that he had been having some real health challenges since returning to Kaua’i and had been busy doing his radio show.

“I’m headed for China on Sunday, then Thailand and back to S. Asia until Dec.,” he wrote. “If you are inclined, give me a ring tomorrow ...”

The subject line of the e-mail was “WE NEVER GOT TO TALK.”

Never imagining that this was to be my final chance to speak with Michael directly, I hesitated to call and ultimately missed him as he returned to Asia for the last time.

During the autumn of 2006, “Out of the Box” continued to air, basically with the same format as when Michael and Michele hosted the show, but of course it was not the same.

Then came the day of the winter solstice, the seventh night of Chanukah, the day I heard of Michael’s untimely passing.

Brother, what’s on your heart?

You are Michael, you are ...

Michael, thank you for your thoughts, your words, your deeds, and for your heart.

Shalom, farewell ... aloha.

Kaua’i Community Radio has established an “Out of the Box” fund in honor of D. Michael Van De Veer. The fund will support an expansion of the existing facility to house a news studio and support news broadcasting, as well as encourage the free speech Michael worked so hard to protect. Donations may be made to KKCR “Out of the Box Fund,” P.O. Box 825, Hanalei, HI 96714.

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Comments

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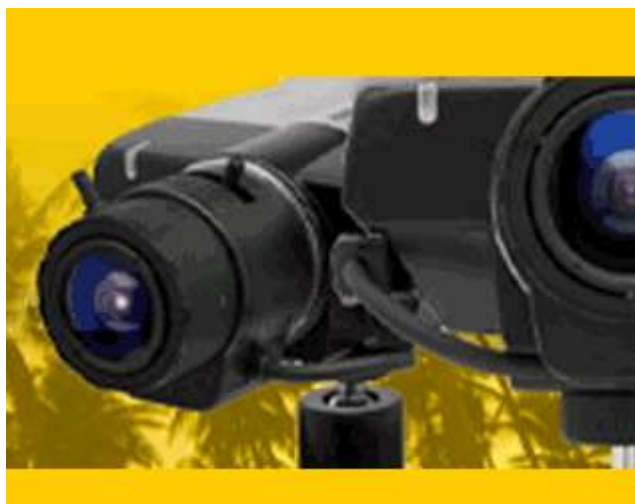
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