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1925-2006

'Pundy' Yokouchi, 81, arts patron, developer

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Advertiser Staff

Masaru "Pundy" Yokouchi, an influential Maui arts patron and real estate investor, died Thursday. He was 81.

Yokouchi was raised in Wailuku, the youngest child of immigrant parents who ran a bakery, and was nicknamed for pao duce, the Portuguese sweetbread he was especially fond of.

He became a pioneering developer of shopping centers, condominiums and commercial buildings, and was a key Neighbor Island organizer for former governor John A. Burns' three successful election campaigns in the 1960s.

But Yokouchi became best known for his support of the arts.

In 1966, Burns appointed Yokouchi as founding chairman of the state Foundation on Culture and the Arts, and he served for 12 years.

"We are heartbroken by Pundy's untimely passing," said council director Ronald Yamakawa. "He was dearly loved and admired by all who knew him and did more for the arts than people will ever realize. Our thoughts and prayers go out to his family. All of us at the State Foundation on Culture and the Arts grieve with them at this great loss."

Yokouchi played a pivotal role in the Hawaiian cultural renaissance by insisting that the traditional arts of the host culture always be given top priority, Yamakawa added.

Yokouchi helped found the Maui Arts and Cultural Center in 1994, and served as its chairman until his death. Yokouchi was instrumental in raising \$32 million to build the nonprofit center, and strongly believed that art should be accessible to everyone, said center president and chief executive officer Karen Fischer.

"We will miss him tremendously," Fischer said. "He was a great man, in every sense of the word."

Yokouchi had a unique ability to bring people together to achieve common goals, and could communicate effectively with people from all walks of life, she said.



Masaru Yokouchi

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"Around Pundy's table, everybody fit," Fischer said. "If it wasn't for Pundy, we probably would have been a much smaller place, and a much more modest place. Pundy was the driving force who could get the money raised, who had a vision for a place that was beautiful esthetically, a place of quality, and a place that really embraces all sides of our community, because that's who he was as a person."

Gov. Linda Lingle, a former Maui mayor and County Council member, recalled Yokouchi fondly.

"Maui has lost a native son who made a positive difference in the lives of many people in the community," Lingle said. "He was well known in his early days for his involvement in politics, but his legacy will be his contributions to the arts, especially for the keiki. I knew Pundy for 26 years, going back to my days on the Maui County Council, and worked closely with him on the establishment of the Maui Arts and Culture Center. He will be dearly missed."

Yokouchi was the longtime president of Valley Isle Realty, and a legendary figure in the state's real estate industry, especially on Maui. For decades, people who worked at Yo-kouchi's firm served on the Maui County Council and the Maui Planning Commission, and Yokouchi assembled investor huis that made fortunes as the island became a premier tourist destination.

Yokouchi insisted in a 1980 interview that political clout was incidental to his real estate success, and was sometimes a hindrance. County Council members who worked for Valley Isle Realty had to abstain from votes on matters that involved the company, he noted.

U.S. Rep. Neil Abercrombie praised Yokouchi's artistic philanthropy.

"Pundy Yokouchi grasped the importance of the arts to society and to individuals," Abercrombie said. "He understood their role in allowing us to realize our full potential as human beings. He enriched our multicultural society by making it his life's mission to share the creative bounty of Hawai'i's artists with the widest possible public. ... His legacy has broadened the horizons of countless Hawai'i residents and will continue for years to come."

Services are pending.