

Lives Lost: Hawai'i football coach who prepped kids for life

By Audrey McAvoy
The Associated Press

HONOLULU — Honolulu football coach Willie Talamoa bought his players cleats, drove them to practice, and often stayed late to talk with those having trouble in school.

For Talamoa, his actions weren't just about football. They were about helping the young people in the hardscrabble neighborhood of Kalihi where he grew up get the attention they deserved.

"His philosophy was, the more kids that are at practice with us, the less kids that are out on the streets of Kalihi," said fellow coach Kinohi Aki, who grew up with Talamoa in Kalihi's public housing developments.

The community remembers the 36-year-old, who passed away last year due to COVID-19, as a mentor and father figure who volunteered countless hours to give young people the opportunities he didn't have.

Talamoa played football at McKinley High School in central Honolulu, then at Dixie State in Utah where he was recruited as a defensive lineman. His interest in coaching grew after he injured his knee in college and had to stop playing.

He worked as a security guard after returning to Hawai'i and started coaching the Kalihi Disciples, a team with 8th and 9th graders that's part of a church league, around a decade ago. In 2015, he became an assistant coach at Farrington High.

Most recently, he coached seven-on-seven Pylon football — a form of touch football played on a smaller field — taking his team to Las Vegas to compete in February 2020.

Aki said Talamoa offered kids an alternative — sometimes the only one they had.

When he saw teens and pre-teens

Olivia Munn says Asian woman, friend's mom, hurt in shoving

NEW YORK (AP) — An Asian woman standing on a New York City street was violently shoved to the ground and police were searching for the suspect, with a spotlight being put on the case by actor Olivia Munn who said she was a friend of the woman's daughter.

The New York Police Department said the 52-year-old woman was outside a bakery on Roosevelt Avenue in the Flushing section of Queens around 2:00pm on Tuesday, February 16, when the suspect got into a verbal dispute with her and pushed her.

The woman hit her head and was taken to the hospital, police said, and the public was being asked for help in finding the suspect.

On Twitter, Munn said "My friend's mom is a 5'3" 50+ Chinese woman and she was attacked" and posted images of the person she said was the suspect.

Munn said her friend's mom needed 10 stitches in her head.

Sawamura guaranteed \$3M by Red Sox, could earn \$6.75M

FORT MYERS, Fla. (AP) — Japanese right-hander Hirokazu Sawamura is guaranteed \$3 million over two years in his contract with the Boston Red Sox and could earn \$6.75 million over three seasons if he appears in 60 games a year.

The 32-year-old gets \$1.2 million salaries in both 2021 and 2022 as part of the deal.

His contract includes a \$3 million team option for 2023, and if that is declined Sawamura could exercise a \$600,000 player option for 2023. He would receive a \$600,000 buyout if both options are declined.

If Sawamura is not released before the 2022 opener, the 2023 salary and buyout would escalate by \$600,000 each.



hanging around, he would ask them what they were doing and where they were going. After hearing responses like "Ah, nothing" and "Oh, cruise," he'd invite them to join his workouts.

"Next thing you know, the kid's asking to try out for the football team," Aki said.

Randall Okimoto, head coach at Farrington for 16 years until 2018, including several with Talamoa as an assistant coach, said it's not easy for coaches to establish strong relationships with players in Kalihi.

Many are experiencing hardships outside school, in some cases because they come from single-parent homes or their family is struggling with money, he said.

"It's just tough. So our kids will put up a defense mechanism where they're not going to let you in," said Okimoto, who also grew up in the neighborhood.

Talamoa began coaching many players in youth leagues, giving him a head start

The woman's daughter, Maggie Kayla Cheng, in a post on Facebook, said her mom was pushed "with such force that she hit her head on the concrete and passed out on the floor."

Munn has been speaking out about an increase in crimes against Asian Americans across the country during the pandemic. In early February, she said in an Instagram post that she's found herself "at a loss for words at the rise of Anti-Asian hate crimes," which "have spiked since Covid and continue to increase."

"Hate crimes against Asians Americans have become so bad that [during one week last month] a 91-year-old Asian American was attacked from behind as he walked down the street in Oakland, an 84-year-old Thai American was murdered in San Francisco, a 64-year-old Vietnamese-American woman was assaulted in San Jose, and a Filipino-American man was slashed in the face in Manhattan," Munn said in the post.

If he remains with the Red Sox through opening day in 2022, the buyout could escalate by up to \$400,000 based on pitching appearances in 2021 or 2022: \$100,000 each for 35, 40, 45, and 50.

Sawamura could earn \$250,000 each season in performance bonuses for pitching appearances: \$50,000 each for 35, 40, 45, 50, and 60.

Sawamura has spent the last 10 years pitching in Japan's top league, going 48-52 with 75 saves, four shutouts, a 2.77 Earned Run Average (ERA), and 790 strikeouts in 88 starts and 264 relief appearances for the Central League's Yomiuri Giants (2011-2016, 2018) and the Pacific League's Chiba Lotte Marines (2020).

He was the Central League's 2011 Rookie of the Year.

on those relationships. He repeatedly showed players he cared. Along with cleats, he bought them mouthpieces, gloves, towels, socks, and other equipment.

He paid dues on their behalf, enabling them to play sports. Sometimes he used his own money, sometimes money from fundraisers.

Talamoa was "training me and coaching me to become a better player and person in life," said Raymond Millare, an 18-year-old senior at Farrington and one of the eight to 10 players Talamoa would routinely pack into his SUV to take to practices.

If Millare was slacking in school, Talamoa prodded him to do better. He reminded Millare to help at home and love his parents and family.

"I can just remember him at the spotlight at my house, listening to his music," Millare said. "I can hear him honking his horn and that's a sign for me to know, 'Oh, coach Willie is here. It's time to get to work.'"

Knowing how much players trusted Talamoa, some parents asked him to talk to their children when they struggled in school. "The first thing Willie would say is

CARING COACH. This 2017 photo provided by Ke'ala Aki shows from left to right, Farrington High School junior varsity football coaches Vale Masalosalo, Taleni Iiua, Kinohi Aki, and Willie Talamoa, in Honolulu. The community remembers the 36-year-old Talamoa, who passed away last year due to COVID-19, as a mentor and father figure who volunteered countless hours to give young people opportunities he didn't have. (Ke'ala Aki via AP)

"I got 'em. I got this." said Aki. Then, he'd talk with the child well after practice ended.

Talamoa's mother is Native Hawaiian and his father Samoan. Samoans and other Pacific Islanders, not including Native Hawaiians, account for just 4% of the state's population but 27% of those who have tested positive for COVID-19.

That's a larger share than any other demographic. Officials say one reason for the disparity is the fact that many Pacific Islanders work in jobs that require them to be in the community, like the food service industry.

Other risk factors include large, multi-generational families living in tight quarters and inadequate educational outreach to Pacific Islanders regarding the virus.

The city of Honolulu has lately developed options for patients to isolate at hotels away from their families if needed. It has also launched education campaigns in Samoan, Tongan, and other Pacific Island languages.

Talamoa's girlfriend, Leilani Legatasia, said she believes Talamoa caught the virus at a men's homeless shelter where he had been working as a guest services assistant. The shelter was dealing with a coronavirus outbreak when he got sick.

After testing positive last summer on August 13, Talamoa immediately checked into a hotel the shelter was using to house infected staff. Talamoa's cousin, Kainoa Talamoa-Elderts, said he didn't want to pass it on to Legatasia and their 10-year-old daughter.

After his death, reminders of Talamoa's commitment to Kalihi's children arrived in the mail — cleats he ordered for his players from eBay, Legatasia said.

Lives Lost is part of an ongoing series of stories remembering people who have died from the coronavirus around the world.

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