

## Questions about death turn to comfort for the bereaved

By Michael Tsai  
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Tucked securely within Meghan Nakamura's cache of indelible childhood memories are sepia-toned recollections of summer vacations to Lahaina, of long afternoons on the links learning the ins and outs of junior golf, of tag-along days to the hospital with her father, a radiologist.

And funerals.

"I went to funerals at a young age — probably younger than I should have," says Nakamura, 30. "I'd see loved ones who had died, and at that young age I had questions about what I saw. But with my Japanese background, they weren't something you would really ask."

Those suppressed questions kindled an interest in forensic science that stayed with Nakamura through her childhood and teen years.

And so, after an eventful high school career — she was captain of Hawaii Prep Academy's Big Island Interscholastic Federation champion water polo team — Nakamura left Hawaii for West Virginia University, home of one of the nation's top forensic science programs.

The culture shock was as profound as it was predictable. In a city where Asians account for just over 3 percent of the total population, Nakamura felt different in ways she had never before experienced.

Food was no comfort, not even on the dorm's monthly Asian Night, when dinner consisted of teriyaki meat on a tortilla.

Regardless, Nakamura says she was energized by her studies, which included intensive forays into science and math.

"It was difficult, but everything was specifically related to forensics so every single part of it was interesting to me," she says. "I embraced it and loved it."

After spending the last four years as a funeral director in San Mateo, Calif., Nakamura recently returned to Hawaii to serve as location manager for Nakamura Mortuary — no relation — on Maui.

Nakamura says her experiences as a funeral director on the mainland gave her insight into the way local families deal with so-called end-of-life arrangements.

"The support each family has here is huge in comparison," she says. "As soon as someone dies, people are going to the home, checking in and offering support. By the time they get to the funeral, it's truly a celebration of life."

Over the course of a typical day, Nakamura will have a hand in everything from overseeing memorial services to preparing decedents for viewing to embalming and cremating. The work is demanding, and the emotional toll, even for experienced managers, can be draining.

"Some families connect with you — they become your friends," Nakamura says. "The reward comes when everything is over and someone says, 'You made this easier. You made this OK.'"

