

Interview transcript of Kurt Miyamura, California Historical Society, November 15, 2022.

[This version has been lightly edited for clarity. The unedited transcript is in the records of the CFM at the California Historical Society.]

Al Bersch: All right, it started recording. Yes, thank you so much. So I've been looking forward to this. And doing these interviews has been really, really helpful for us in processing the Flower Market collection, so I just really want to say thank you so much for taking the time. So I'll just get started by saying this recording is taking place on Tuesday, November 15th, over video chat. My name's Al Bersch. I'm the metadata and systems librarian at the California Historical Society, and I'm conducting this interview today. And the interview subject today is Kurt Miyamura. And Kurt, if you could just please state your name and date for the record.

Kurt Miyamura: Kurt Miyamura. November 15th, 2022.

Al Bersch: Great, thank you so much. So just to get started, I'm going to use this interview guide that I sent you, but it's really just a template and we can go from here. If there's anything that you really feel you'd like to add or change, that's great, and we can just go with the flow. But I was wondering if you could start just by talking about the story of how your family got involved in the flower business, when they got involved and so forth.

Kurt Miyamura: All right. Well, my parents got married in 1945, and they were in the internment camps. My mother is Amy Yoshida, and her family owned Sunnyside Nurseries in Oakland, California. She's the oldest in the family. So coming out of the internment camps, my parents opened up a flower shop at the corner of Sunnyside and 97th Avenue, at the location of the nursery. And therefore, my father started going to the Flower Market. And my parents stayed at that location until about, I think, 1958 and moved to San Leandro to their own flower shop. And from there, our family was basically involved with a flower shop, in which we also lived right behind the flower shop. So our family was intricately involved on the daily operations. That's how we got started.

Al Bersch: Yeah, that's great. And how long were you there?

Kurt Miyamura: The flower shop stayed in existence until 2020, when I finally decided that it was not, let's say, a viable future operation for myself. And so that's when I decided to close down the flower shop. But we were there at that location for approximately, what, almost, I guess, a little over 50 years. Yeah.

Al Bersch: And that's all really long time-

- Kurt Miyamura: And during that time, I took over the business from my parents and gradually took over all the operations, including going to the Flower Market in San Francisco.
- Al Bersch: And what was that like? Can you talk about some of your memories when you first started going, and what your typical day was like?
- Kurt Miyamura: Well, when I first started going, of course I was a little kid when I went with my father. And I always enjoyed going there, seeing the hustle and bustle of the Flower Market between 2:00 and 5:00 the morning. But as I got older and took over to business, I got to know a lot of other florists and a lot of the vendors at the Flower Market. And I actually enjoyed going to the Flower Market, even though it was at some ungodly hours in the morning, just for all the contacts and the relationships that developed over the years between the wholesalers and other florists. I normally would have breakfast many times with other florists, and occasionally with some of the vendors, if they had time.
- Al Bersch: Was that in the cafe at the flower mart?
- Kurt Miyamura: Oh, yeah. There was nowhere else to go, really. Everyone went to the Flower Market Cafe or the Flower Market restaurant there. Very few people went offsite.
- Al Bersch: Sure. And how old were you when you started to feel like having more of ownership in your family business, or not showing up as a kid but more as somebody running the business?
- Kurt Miyamura: Well, I came in with them, my parents, when I was probably a little over 30 years old, and I'd say it took about five or six years. And I guess you can officially say things really started on my watch when my dad said, "Okay, you can start going to the Flower Market from now on." So that pretty much gave me the feeling that, "Okay, I guess I'm in charge here." Because that meant I bought whatever I thought was proper for the flower shop and what was needed. And from there on, I had at least 15 years where basically I was in charge of the flower shop. And that was fine. My parents, they worked really hard, as most first-generation business people do. They worked really hard and did really well with the business, until later on in the years when things started changing and all of the big, so-called order gatherers came into the business. And it took away the so-called high-end margins for a lot of the small florist.
- Al Bersch: And when was that?
- Kurt Miyamura: I'd say that started probably in the early '90s. Probably a little bit before that. Yes.
- Al Bersch: And how was that for your family? Was that a period of stress, financial stress with the business or-

Kurt Miyamura: Well, we were never really in financial stress, but the margins, the growth really leveled out and that was a telltale sign. I mean, I had a bit of a business background and I started seeing it in the early '90s, where the gross revenue really leveled off. And if it weren't for certain things in our local area, I might have even closed the business earlier. But the '80s, and even into the early '90s, were really a good time for a lot of florists, and it was a good time for florists and the vendors at the Flower Market.

Al Bersch: Can you talk about that a little bit? What was that like, your relationship with the vendors? Could you walk me through a typical day for you, how that might be?

Kurt Miyamura: Well, a typical day would be, you pull into the parking lot and every florist would have their list of items that they would need to appropriate for their business. And we each had basically our regular vendors [00:09:00] that we would get our goods from. And if we couldn't find it from them, we would go to other vendors. And the wholesalers were almost always happy to deal with you, because they needed business and if you weren't their regular customer, you could possibly become one of their regular customers. I considered that time in the '80s, even into [00:09:30] the early '90s, as a high point for florists and vendors at the Flower Market. And I go back to... I belong to a flora organization called FTD, which, they transmitted orders between FTD florists basically in the US and worldwide. And we set up a relationship, or a local FTD unit set up a relationship with the Flower Market during that time, to do the biggest FTD design show west of the Mississippi in the United States. And we partnered with the San Francisco Flower Market, and they provided the venue and we provided the designers and brought in florists from almost everywhere. We advertised in California and throughout the West. We had people come from all over the Western United States to attend this flower market show in San Francisco.

Kurt Miyamura: I think that's one of the high points.

Al Bersch: And was your father still involved in the business at that point, or had you taken over from him?

Kurt Miyamura: Oh, he was happy to step to the back and do just what he wanted to do at the flower shop. And he's not A-type person, so he was happy just to do work in the background and do whatever he felt was needed on an everyday basis.

Al Bersch: Yeah, that's great.

Kurt Miyamura: Yeah. So I personally had it fairly good, even though [00:11:30] as a typical florist working long hours, which was maybe a little bit tough if you're a family person. We didn't have any kids, so my wife worked every day. So it wasn't so bad, except for weekends.

Al Bersch: So you and your wife ran the business together at that point?

Kurt Miyamura: Oh, no. My wife had her own job.

Al Bersch: Okay.

Kurt Miyamura: Yeah. So when it came to the point where I really had... My parents helped me before I really needed to hire some people. I looked at what it would take to finally move my parents out of the business and hire people and decided, "No, it wasn't going to work." I think it was-

Al Bersch: So your mother was involved in the business too, then?

Kurt Miyamura: Oh, yeah. Yes, she was. She would answer the phones, do some of the book work, and she also did some of the work, obviously. It's a family business. Typical of a lot of small businesses.

Al Bersch: Yeah. So did your parents meet in the incarceration camp, as well as get married?

Kurt Miyamura: Yes, they did. They met and married in 1945, just at the end of their internment.

Al Bersch: Okay. And what camp were they in?

Kurt Miyamura: They were in Tule Lake. Of course, that's where both my parents went, and that's where they met.

Al Bersch: And were their families involved in flora culture prior to them starting their own flower shop?

Kurt Miyamura: Well, yes. My mother's side, the Yoshida family, they owned Sunnyside Nurseries in Oakland, which it became one of the largest indoor house plant nurseries in the country, basically, during the '60s and early '70s. And that's where I got my background.

Al Bersch: So while your mother was incarcerated, and her family, what happened to the business in that time?

Kurt Miyamura: Basically, my understanding, the business really just closed up. But they were able to hang onto the property because of, let's say, friendly outside people that kept an eye on things for them. In which a lot of the Japanese Americans did have a lot of friendly people, people who were sympathetic to their situation and helped pay the taxes, help keep an eye on the property, so that they were able to come out and still have something. And unfortunately, a lot of Japanese people did lose a lot of their property because they couldn't pay their taxes or it was basically taken from them for other reasons on there. But my parents on both sides were able to keep their properties. My father's side had orchards up in Placer County, and they were able to keep their property.

- Kurt Miyamura: But he didn't want to be a fruit farmer anymore, though.
- Al Bersch: And did your family have connections to any flower farmers or flower growers, besides just through the Flower Market?
- Kurt Miyamura: Yeah. Coming out of the camps, a lot of the Japanese were growers. They were farmers who, originally, the parents were farmers and they came over as farmers. But they also, when they came over, started to grow in the flora culture industry, whether it was roses, carnations, or anything. So, coming out of the camp, it was a close-knit community of a lot of the flora culture people. But yeah, my parents knew a lot of people. My mom's family knew a lot of people that grew other types of agriculture crops, whether it was the bedding plants or whether it was cut flowers. They all stayed relatively close together, so everyone knew everyone else. They knew who was growing what. So yes, we developed relationships with some of the rose growers and carnation growers, and we would buy directly from them. That was, I guess, a good thing about coming out of the internment camps. That people didn't trust the Japanese and the Japanese didn't trust a lot of other people, so the Japanese were forced to stay within their community for almost everything.
- Al Bersch: And did you see those dynamics go into the Flower Market too, as well? On just-
- Kurt Miyamura: Oh, I mean, if you look at the Flower Market, it set up the so-called Italian side and the Japanese market. So yeah, the communities in those days kind of grew together. And the Italian people and the Japanese people at the Flower Market, basically, they all knew each other. They were growers. And yes, there was friendly competition, but they all knew for the market to survive they all had to work together. Basically, they did, and it was for the benefit of... For the florists. So San Francisco was basically the largest one-stop flower market on the West Coast. LA had theirs, but San Francisco was really a centralized location, and people all the way from Reno used to come down to the Flower Market because they can get almost everything they needed in one trip. So yes, everyone knew each other. And for a while, it seemed like a pretty, let's say, communal situation with everyone at the Flower Market, even though I don't know the internal dynamics of the actual Flower Market owners. They had their own situations, but they seem to have gotten along.
- Al Bersch: And can you talk a little bit about how you've seen it change, I guess, since the '80s and '90s when you talked about that being a pretty great time there? Some of the changes that happened over the years.
- Kurt Miyamura: Over the years in the flower market? I can't say that I know a lot of it has changed at that time, except for the ownership of the flower vendors. Originally, it was the original owners who started the nurseries, and they came to the flower market and sold their goods. Obviously, those people were very

old, so they would have to hire people to bring in their goods instead of them being there. Or if they were lucky enough, they would have someone in their family come in. As the '80s moved on to the '90s, you saw all of the what we would call old-timers retire or pass away. And so you would see other people come in, and basically it would not be the growers anymore, but people who were, well, third sellers. They would buy goods wholesale and resell wholesale with a small markup to the florist.

So they actually were not the growers anymore. And then obviously the offshore growers started to undercut a lot of the growers in California. And so you started to see a lot more people just bringing in goods, a lot of the vendors bringing in goods that were not grown exclusively in the United States or California. And basically, they really cut into the margins of all of the California growers. So you saw less and less California goods brought into the market, and more and more of the offshore people bringing in things. And that's almost everything. So in that respect, I guess a lot of these so-called old-timers either close up their nurseries, and that's how it changed. And it also changed on, let's say, the board of directors for each of the Flower Markets, from what I understand. You had very few original owners on the boards anymore, and either their family or their relatives or other people that were not part of the original ownership group. So, yeah, things changed.

Al Bersch: Well, thanks for talking about that. One of our other questions is, what role, if any, has the Flower Market played in your social life?

Kurt Miyamura: Well, obviously you meet lot of people there, and some of my best friends now are either former florists or people who are still working, which I find it hard to believe at times, since I'm 70 years old. But yeah, I still socialize with three or four other florists that I've gotten to know very well. And I still see some of my cousins who used to run Sunnyside Nurseries. Yeah. But basically, any socializing, it's basically just some of the old florists. I still go to a few floral functions, which are far and few in between, but it's nice seeing some of the old florists. Yeah, the old friends. Yeah. I mean, if I went to the Flower Market today, it's been 20 years, I don't know anyone there anymore except for maybe some of the administrative people in the actual Flower Market office. And I always hear how it's changed so much, but things change. I'm very happy that I got out of the floral business when I did.

Al Bersch: Can you talk a little bit about that? What was that like, deciding to leave, and what was that process like?

Kurt Miyamura: What was it like? Well, everyone knows that, well, not everyone, but I knew I was going to leave the business sooner or later. And I'd had an opportunity to go to another business, and so I was working that up for a couple years. And when I decided it was time to leave in 2020, I was going to close up at the end of the year. And then I decided, "You know what? I'm going to close a little bit early. I'll close after Mother's Day." And then I said, "I don't want to work

another Mother's Day." So I said, "I'll close after Valentine's Day." And then I finally said, "I don't want to go through another Valentine's Day." So in December 2019, I made up my mind, "Okay, I'm going to close the shop in January." So I made all my notices and closed the shop in January, and I was very happy not to go through another Valentine's Day, which is always stressful. And I never really looked back. I enjoy what I'm doing now, and I have more of a life with my wife and I have more time to do what I want.

And I tell all my friends that are still working, I said, "Boy, it's a tough business. I don't see how you're still in it." And I still have a cousin who owns a florist in Carmichael and I tell her all the time, "How do you do it?" She goes, "I don't know. It's just killing me." And I said, "Well, you do have some choices." She goes, "Yeah, I don't know what else I'm going to do, though." So like I said, I'm happy I got out. I have friends that say, "Yeah, I'm happy that you're out. I should have got out sooner." But I did enjoy the people, especially my fellow florists and the vendors at the market. It's just that the business has gotten so hard, especially for anyone who's a small business person. Things has gotten more difficult to run a business here in the last 20 years, and COVID really took it out. The COVID virus really took things out of a lot of small businesses, especially the small florists. A lot of them closed up.

Al Bersch: Yeah. And is Sunnyside, is the shop still running? And just-

Kurt Miyamura: Oh, no. No, the nursery closed down years ago. My cousin, who ended up heading to Sunnyside Nursery, he saw the writing on the wall. He could see it. It was a family business that became very, very large, and at one time very, very profitable. Everything changes in every business. And almost every one of those large house plant nurseries has gone out business, and it's because the costs have gotten to be so high, especially in California. But yeah, that nursery was sold off, I don't know how many years ago, years ago, something like that. Yeah. I'm sure he addressed it when he was interviewed.

Al Bersch: Well, yeah, this is all really interesting to hear. Thank you. I'm wondering if you could just talk about maybe just some memories you have of the Flower Market, if anything stands out to you as memorable people or relationships that you may have had there?

Kurt Miyamura: Well, there's a few of the memorable people. Well, as a child, I always remember... I forgot. He used to be the so-called parking security guy there. I forgot his name, but he was a big guy and he had control of the parking lot. Even when I first started going in myself, he would control the parking lot. He was always a character, and he was a good person. And I always remember him, and I will always remember him. I'm sorry, I forgot his name. A few of the owners, of course. There was Lucky Podesta, who was always a very, let's say, kind and generous person. Always had the Flower Market's best interest at hand, at least that's what I always thought. And he was always very, very supportive of the local florist and their business.

He retired years ago also, and I still talk to him every once in a while. He's in Arizona. And the old Flower Market manager became a friend. That was Robert Otsuka, and he left the Flower Market management team, oh, I don't know, seven years ago. But always had good dealings with him, and I talk to him every once in a while also. And then the two gals who worked the office. Rose and Jeanne have been there a long time, and I'm sure you've heard their names mentioned. I still see Jeanne once in a while at the grocery store out where I live, and then I talk to Rose every once in a while. I can remember when she had her... Or she got married before she had a child and I asked her, I don't know, several years ago, "How old is your daughter?" She said, "Oh, she's 10 years old." And I go, "Oh, it's been that long?" And she goes, "Yeah, it's been that long." Those two gals have been in the office for a long time, and everyone remembers them because they always had to deal with one or the other. But-

Al Bersch: Yeah, I've met Jeanne and Rose several times. They've been in to take part in some of the interviews, so that's been great.

Kurt Miyamura: And they always give me a bad time, the both of them, because of a situation when my mother called us to the Flower Market, and this was before cell phones, and she said needed to talk to me. So I think it was Rose who got on the so-called loud speaker at the flower mark and said, "Kurt Miyamura, Kurt Miyamura, your mother's on the line, she wants to talk to you." And that's all they remind me about. They get a kick out of that. And so I'd go to the office, and on the way to the office they're saying, "Hey, your mother wants to talk to you." The vendors or the florists would say, "Hey, Kurt, your mother wants to talk to you." That's always a funny situation, but it endears me to both of the gals.

Al Bersch: Wow, that's great.

Kurt Miyamura: Yeah. So there's a lot of good memories at the market. Also when they serve their Christmas celebration where they have pastries and coffee, donuts and so on. Everyone likes free food, so people would be waiting in line for that.

Al Bersch: Yeah, that's great.

Kurt Miyamura: Christmas was with a hectic time, but it was also a happy time around the market.

Al Bersch: So, yeah, wondering, at Christmas, how did you experience Christmas at your flower shop in terms of what you sold or what you bought?

Kurt Miyamura: Well, Christmas back in the '80s, it was very traditional. People would want Christmas arrangements for the house, and so you can depend on people ordering centerpieces and arrangements for the house and doing some Christmas decorations. It also depended on people buying a poinsettia plant. And at a flower shop, you would always decorate them up a little bit more than

you would see otherwise. And so you can get \$25 or so for a poinsettia plant. But as the years went on, things got commoditized and people didn't want the arrangements at Christmas time. And they said, "Oh, we can pick up an okay plant at Costco or one of the grocery stores for \$6 or \$7." And those things really started showing up in the '90s. Christmas, where you would work a lot of late hours, was not that big a deal anymore. And so, that was one of the things. We used to order a couple of hundred poinsettia plants at Christmas, and come 2000, we might order a couple dozen.

And Easter was the same way. We would order 150 Easter lilies, and Easter was like a non-holiday after a while. We didn't even order Easter lilies anymore. Mother's Day was always the biggest holiday, because it was over two or three days. And even then, it's still a really busy holiday, but it's not like it used to be. I still help out with friends on those two holidays. And last Mother's Day, we did not work a Friday night. We just worked in Saturday and part of Saturday evening, and that was it. It used to be you work Thursday nights and Friday nights, and Saturday nights. And so the floral business has really changed and it really reflects in the Flower Market also, the days that they're open, from what I understand. And so every business evolves. I don't know if you call it evolving or devolving, but if you don't change with the times, you go away with the times.

Al Bersch: Yeah. Did you do many floral arrangements for different occasions like graduations or funerals, or anything like that?

Kurt Miyamura: Yeah. Our particular shop, we had a relationship with the funeral home in San Leandro, and they referred any floral orders to our shop and that was our saving grace. We had a very good relationship with them, an excellent one. They would even take orders for us and give us the order, because they said they liked our work and they didn't like to work with the other florists in our town. So that was really a cash cow for us. If we didn't have that, I might have even closed earlier. So we had a niche, and that niche was a [00:38:30] very profitable niche for our flower shop. Even with that, having to hire on maybe two people or three people was just not going to be feasible for my time at the shop, after 2000.

Kurt Miyamura: So like I said, it was the funeral work that really kept our shop alive.

Al Bersch: Well, thanks for all that. I think we're almost at an hour. And just wondering, is there anything that you really feel like you would add to this conversation or suggestions for future conversations, as we're gathering history about the Flower Market? Does anything come to mind that is missing from this, from what we talked about so far?

Kurt Miyamura: Not really. Not really. I mean, you asked a lot of the right questions, so I'm sure you've done your share of interviews. So I can't think of anything else offhand, to be honest.

Al Bersch: Well, thank you for-

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Kurt Miyamura: Take care.