

# Michael Omi

## An Enlightened Academic



*Michael Omi embodies the values and mission of the Koshland Program. He has served on the Koshland Committee since 1999 and was twice chair of the Committee. Michael is an associate professor of ethnic studies at UC Berkeley and is renowned for his theories on the social construction of race. We sat down with Michael to hear his views on community building and the impact of Koshland on neighborhoods across the Bay Area.*

### **Greetings, Michael, can you tell us a bit about your background?**

I was born in Berkeley. My family moved to San Francisco when I was about six months old. So I grew up in Western Addition neighborhood, mainly in the African American community, though the Western Addition was going through a transition at that time, and it was a shared community between Japanese Americans and African Americans. Later my family moved to the Richmond District. At the time it was predominantly Irish and Russian Jewish immigrants.

### **So you are a rare Bay Area native?**

I am, and one thing that got me interested in issues of race and ethnicity, looking back in hindsight, was that I grew up in these distinct kinds of communities. I witnessed first hand their demographic transformations. In the Richmond, it was an influx of Chinese Americans and the transformation of Clement Street from Russian pubs and Irish delis to Chinese noodle shops.

### **Is there anything that influenced you as you grew up that led you into the teaching profession?**

Not really. I never thought about being an academic at all. In fact, I went to university thinking I was going to be a pharmacist, mind you that was before the big health maintenance organizations (HMOs), so my vision of the pharmacy was the small local drugstore that stocked the comic books.

### **Yes, and today you would be working at some large chain.**

Exactly (laughing). So it was at a particular period of time that I went to UC Berkeley. It was after the Third World Strike, during mobilizations against the war in Vietnam, and struggles over a piece of turf known as People's Park. The events outside the classroom in those days really had a dramatic and jarring effect on me. I began thinking about issues around social justice much more deeply. And then, for me, it became a quest to try and connect what I was learning in the classroom and use that to interpret or comprehend what was going on in the streets. What really impressed me were professors who were able to make that connection. Professors who took their course content and made it relevant to what was going on – and for them it was kind of unavoidable – we had National Guard in the streets and helicopters descending on campus with tear gas, so the classroom couldn't be this autonomous space anymore. It had to be a place where people could start to critically reflect on what was going on outside.

### **Was there a specific professor who influenced you during this period?**

No, it was a series of professors. Mainly some in sociology. It was interesting, after I gave up on the pharmacist idea I thought I wanted to go to law school to become an immigration lawyer. Then I spoke with a faculty member and he said, "You know, there are a lot of lawyers out there. Have you ever thought of a career in academia?" Until that time I hadn't thought about it, so I started pursuing that direction.

I think I was radicalized at a particular period when the student body had very radical and progressive ideas and often confronted very conservative faculty members. Then, as I became a professor myself, I felt as if I were part of a generation of teachers that came into the classroom with progressive ideas about social justice at a time when the student body was becoming more conservative. It was sort of a reverse situation.

**How long have you served on the Koshland Committee?**

I have been on the Committee since 1999. In fact, this is my final year. I cycle off in March 2008, and I was honored to serve twice as chair of the Koshland Committee.

**Is there anything from the academic world or your upbringing that got you interested in working with the Koshland Program?**

One of the main things is the fact that the Koshland Program works to build civic unity in communities that are undergoing profound transformation. I grew up in the Western Addition and Richmond neighborhoods in the city and witnessed transformations in race, ethnicity, and class. These experiences led me to work in communities to build social connectedness between disparate groups of people who found they occupied the same geographic space. The other thing that attracted me was that much of my academic work is much more theoretical and not as grounded as the work of the Koshland Program.

Academically, one of the things that I am supposedly well-known for is looking at the social construction of race as a category and seeing how that has transformed over the decades. However, what I was missing in academia was that groundedness, to look more at the lived experience and how people interact with one another, discovering the prospects and problems of trying to build forms of cooperative and collaborative work.

**As you worked with the Koshland Program and watched it partner with neighborhoods for five years, did anything evolve that changed how you thought about your theoretical work?**

It's interesting, and the answer is yes and no. It wasn't that I was looking for some sort of connectedness in that sense. I didn't want to make the Koshland work something I studied and brought into the academic house. I wanted to maintain distinctiveness; they don't mesh together so seamlessly. What I did see however was ways in which very different group identities from out of these settings, and often it encourages people to cross boundaries with respect to many forms of social identity: such as issues of sexual identity or gender or race and ethnicity. So I believe I developed a really deep appreciation for how people bring baggage to the table when they work together, but how they are also able to learn from one another and build and create a new form of group consciousness. Sometimes it worked beautifully and sometimes it fell flat on its face.

**What is the reputation of the Koshland Program in the neighborhoods you've worked or in the larger community?**

Many neighborhoods felt very empowered by the Program; they felt a sense of legitimacy and recognition for the hard work that had taken place. Koshland has struggled with the concept of whether we were rewarding people and acknowledging work that these neighborhood heroes had already done, versus assessing people's potential for work that remained to be done. In the early years Koshland partnered with Awardees who worked more on their own individual projects, whereas now there is much more of an emphasis of getting a group together and have them form a common vision of what they would like to see happen in their community.

**This is the new Koshland Model?**

Exactly, and we've learned so much from the neighborhoods – West Alameda, for example. They had a great idea to take some of the Koshland funds and start a re-granting program in their community. They served as the key group to dole out resources to the rest of the community. This was a terrific idea generated from that neighborhood group that had a ripple effect of expanding civic unity in directions we didn't anticipate.

**How do you establish benchmarks of civic unity? Does it defy quantitative indicators?**

Yes, you have to be careful about how you measure this. In many respects some of the new evaluation strategies have focused on storytelling and how people are able to talk about their lives. In many ways that is a much richer source of data because it has human interest, it goes beyond numbers to get at people's life experiences.

**How involved is the Committee in the work of the Koshland Program?**

We are involved. There are various sub-committees that work on specific issues such as the new Koshland Model. And one thing all members enjoy are the site visits to check out neighborhoods. We meet key people and hear firsthand the issues they grapple with. You see the demographics: families falling below the poverty line, low graduation rates, issues on criminality. But when we visit and hear from residents, we understand how they see their communities, the potential they see in their neighborhoods, and how they reflect on the situation – it is really eye opening.

**You get beyond the statistics?**

You really do. It puts you in touch with the hopes and fears of people who live in those communities.

**Has the Koshland Program helped bring these communities together?**

Yes, I believe so. Having the partnership more issue-focused on the front-end helps. Residents know what they want their community to look like in five years, and we help create an agenda for action to get there. We are also working on linking neighborhoods that have gone through the Koshland Program so they can learn from one another and don't have to re-invent the wheel each time. Many of the problems they face are regional and not necessarily local, so helping these neighborhoods network and collaborate to address concerns is key and something the Koshland Program is working to improve.