Leaving behind a legacy

Nationally renowned poet Jeff Tagami dies of pancreatic cancer

By ERICK CHALHOUB
of the REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

WATSONVILLE — Jeff Tagami, nationally renowned poet and Watsonville native, died Saturday at Dominican Hospital in Santa Cruz after a battle with pancreatic cancer.

Tagami, 57, was an instructor of writing, composition and literature at Cabrillo College for 20 years, just recently teaching during the spring semester. He was also a lecturer at UC Santa Cruz.

His prose and poetry appeared in many national literary magazines and anthologies. Tagami appeared in the PBS documentary “The US of Poetry,” in which his poem, “Song of Pajaro” was featured in 1986. “Pajaro is just not something in the imagination, it is a place, it is a people and those people work and breathe off the lands; they are the lands,” Tagami said about his “Song of Pajaro” poem during an interview with the Register-Pajaronian in 2003.

A graduate of Watsonville High School in 1972, Tagami was inducted into the school’s hall of fame in May.

He attended Cabrillo College in 1972, where he discovered his writing skill and received mentorship from well-known poets Morton Marcus, Joseph Strohl and Philip Levine. He also met poet Lawson Inada, considered one of the first Asian American published writers.

Tagami had said he learned about the history of Asian agricultural workers while taking a class from historian Sandy Lyndon, which he said played a significant role in his writing.

“He gave voice to the marginalized people,” said Shirley Ancheta, Tagami’s wife and Cabrillo English instructor. “He will be greatly missed by the community. It’s a really big loss.”

Tagami moved to San Francisco in 1977, where he joined the Kearny Street Collective, a group of Asian-American artists and writers.

He received his B.A. in literature from UC Santa Cruz and a graduate degree in English from San Francisco State University.

Tagami penned a collection of poetry titled “October Light,” as well as four anthologies. His work has appeared in numerous literary magazines, and he has read for the Poetry Society of America, and the Academy of American Poets.

Tagami wrote the inaugural poem for Cabrillo’s Watsonville expansion in 2001, said Rachel Mayo, Cabrillo College’s dean of education centers in Watsonville and Scotts Valley. The poem celebrated the working class community, a theme that was common in his writing.

“Jeff was the unofficial poet laureate of the Watsonville Center,” Mayo said. “He was a quiet, gentle, strong spirit.”

Mayo said Tagami was a teacher who was really dedicated to his students and made sure they were prepared to transfer to a four-year university.

“He brought something to the (English) department that was very unique,” Mayo said.

Cabrillo College instructor Elisa Omosoppe said the loss of Tagami is already being felt in the community.

“It’s a great loss to Cabrillo College and the community,” she said. “He was a social activist who believed in social justice. He had a very strong sense of fairness that was certainly obvious in his teaching and interaction with the people in the community. He certainly does leave a wonderful legacy with his poetry and activism.”

Tagami is survived by his wife, Shirley Ancheta, sons, Miles and Travis, parents Robert and Judith Tagami, siblings, Andrea Bacaloy, Lene’ Tagami, Robert (Judy) Tagami, Ray (Judy) Tagami, Fred Tagami, Richard (Diane) Tagami, Alan (Lynne) Tagami and numerous nieces and nephews. Private services will be held.