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Lanterns drifted out to sea at Ala Moana Beach Park, where several thousand participated in the sunset ceremony.

# LIGHTING THEIR WAY

By Laurie Au  
STAR-BULLETIN

**T**WO SISTERS held each other as they released candle-lit lanterns into the ocean that their husbands had loved so much. Though there were thousands crowded next to them, for just a moment they were alone. "When you go out and feel the water, even though there's a lot of people around you, it just shuts everything else out," said Karen Lee after embracing sister Becky Arakawa. "It was just me and my sister with our husbands."

On top of a paper lantern at the ninth annual Toro Nagashi ceremony in Ala Moana last night, Lee had written a message to her husband, Bob, telling him how much she still misses him, nearly 4½ years after his death. She wears a golden locket with his picture around her neck almost every day.

More than 34,000 people — exceeding last year's numbers — attended last night's event, which originated in Japan but has become a ceremony for everyone of all ethnicities and beliefs. "What is so beautiful about this is that it has grown to our nonmembers," said the Rev. Given Tokunaga, with Hawaii's Shinnyo-en, a Buddhist order that originated in Japan and that started the event nine years ago. "There is no discrimination between friend or foe. We are so touched by the sincerity of other faiths. No matter what your faith, don't forget your origin."

THE EVENT, also sponsored by the Na Lei Aloha Foundation, has grown over the years from a couple hundred people gathering at Keehi Lagoon to tens of thousands celebrating their Memorial Day by also honoring their ancestors and America's soldiers.

By sending a lit lantern out to sea, believers hope that it will guide their ancestors' spirits to salvation or happiness. Volunteers aboard seven canoes, decorated with ti leaves and flowers, sent out wooden lanterns that held the names and messages to honor the deceased and for those who died in war and natural disasters.

Lee bought seven lanterns, which her family and friends released. There were 450 paper and foam lanterns available, and all had been given out before the ceremony.

After the lanterns drift out into sea, they are brought back in. Personal messages and names written on Japanese rice paper are cut out and sent to Japan, where they are properly burned in a temple for the ancestors according to Shinnyo-en tradition.

The lantern ceremony has brought visitors from all over the world, including thousands from Japan, some who purposely plan their trip to attend the lantern floating.

Leticia and Ken Okada are a part of Las Vegas' Shinnyo-en. They have seen Hawaii's lantern floating on television, but decided this year they would rather see it in person.

Ken Okada, who was born in Japan, wrote a

"We feel by offering a consolation that we will be comforted knowing that they are comforted. We're just surprised and pleased with how many people came out."

**Ken Okada**

Las Vegas resident who attended to ceremony in remembrance of his late father



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message for his father. "We feel by offering a consolation that we will be comforted knowing that they are comforted," he said. "We're just surprised and pleased with how many people came out." With the sound of taiko drums in the background, thousands waded into Ala Moana's waters to release their lanterns as the horizon turned orange. In the distance they could see the canoes releasing the lanterns, their orange glow glistening in the dark waters.

A COUPLE, Tanya Coppes and Eric Metzker, both in white shirts, held each other for a long time as they watched their lanterns drift away. Knee deep in water, Coppes thought of her grandmother, who died a month ago. Metzker had flashes of memories of his friends. Lee held her sister, Arakawa, as she sobbed when she thought of her husband, Reggie, who died in March of cancer. He was an athlete who loved coming to Magic Island to swim and train for triathlons. His ashes were scattered in these waters in April.

"He's here," Arakawa said. "He's in a place where everybody else is shining brightly." As the lanterns drifted farther away, everyone was connected with the hopes that their loved ones have found salvation. Wanda Akiu and Naomi Neal, both of Kailua, joined hands and sang "Hawaii Aloha" as it played in the background. When the song ended, they embraced, took another look at the lanterns and said aloha to the sea.



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## BY THE NUMBERS

This marks the ninth annual Toro Nagashi:

**900:** The number of wooden lanterns set afloat. Two hundred were released from the Ala Moana Beach shore, and 700 from seven canoes.  
**450:** The number of paper and foam lanterns release by public participants.

Lanterns were carried out to the water during ceremonies last night. Above, Shinso Ito, head of Shinnyo-en, blessed the lanterns. "The Buddha's teaching is likened to a great ocean that embraces and accepts everything," she wrote in a program for the service.



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People waited on shore before wading into the water to release their lanterns.



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Shinso Ito prayed during the ceremony, which her late father, Shinso Ito, began nine years ago. At left, volunteers lit candles before the lanterns were set out to sea, above. "I do hope, that as the seas of Hawaii are connected to all the oceans of the world, this event will help bring people together in harmony," Shinso Ito wrote in the program brochure.



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