

Current Biography® Yearbook 2018

Virgil Abloh

Date of birth: September 30, 1980

Occupation: Fashion designer

In March 2018, the internationally recognized French fashion house Louis Vuitton made headlines when it named American designer Virgil Abloh artistic director of its menswear line. The move was in some ways an unlikely one, as Abloh was both a relatively new designer and particularly active within the realm of streetwear, a segment of fashion that differed significantly from earlier incarnations of the Louis Vuitton brand in terms of its aesthetic, relative practicality, and appeal to young people and people of color. However, some in the fashion industry were less surprised by Abloh's selection, which signaled a desire among Louis Vuitton's leadership to tap into new trends and schools of thought and thereby ensure the longevity of the 164-year-old brand. "The first thing I am going to do is define new codes," Abloh told Vanessa Friedman and Elizabeth Paton for the *New York Times* (26 Mar. 2018) of his plans for the menswear line. "My muse has always been what people actually wear, and I am really excited to make a luxury version of that."

Active within the fashion community since the early aughts, Abloh had no formal training in clothing design and instead entered the field after completing degrees in civil engineering and architecture. Through his longtime creative partnership with hip-hop artist and fashion devotee Kanye West, Abloh made a name for himself in streetwear and went on to open his first store, the streetwear boutique RSVP Gallery, in 2009. After designing a short-lived fashion line known as Pyrex Vision, Abloh established a new label, Off-White, in 2013 and worked extensively to explore and promote his design aesthetic through its men's, women's, and furniture collections. "I don't come from where I'm supposed to come from," he told Diane Solway for *W* magazine (20 Apr. 2017). "So I have to prove that this is design, that this is art, that this is valid." Indeed, the popularity of Off-White and Abloh's hiring at Louis Vuitton have aptly demonstrated his success in that endeavor, and an exhibition dedicated to his work was scheduled to open at



GSAPPstudent, via Wikimedia Commons

the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago in June 2019.

EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION

Abloh was born on September 30, 1980, near Chicago, Illinois, to parents who had immigrated to the United States from Ghana. His mother worked as a seamstress, and Abloh would later credit her with laying the foundation for his later work in fashion. His father managed a paint company. Abloh grew up with his parents and sister in Rockford, a town in north-central Illinois, where he attended Boylan Catholic High School.

As a teenager, Abloh was interested in athletic pursuits, including soccer and skateboarding. He also enjoyed music and developed an interest in deejaying, which he practiced on the weekends during his high school years. Despite such interests, however, Abloh did not initially consider pursuing a career in the arts, and he would later come to consider his teenage self's skepticism a source of inspiration. "I'm always trying to prove to my 17-year-old self that I can do creative things I thought weren't possible," he told Solway. After graduating from Boylan Catholic in

1998, Abloh enrolled in the University of Wisconsin–Madison, where he earned his bachelor's degree in civil engineering in 2003. He went on to enroll in a graduate program in architecture at the Illinois Institute of Technology, completing his master's degree in 2006.

EARLY CAREER

While living in Chicago after completing his bachelor's degree, Abloh began to explore the field of design independently, creating his own graphic T-shirts and launching his own website. A crucial point in Abloh's career trajectory came in 2002, when he began what would become a long-term affiliation with the hip-hop artist Kanye West. A Chicago native, West had been working as a music producer since the 1990s and by 2002 was beginning to establish himself as a rapper in his own right. After capturing West's attention with his design work, Abloh formed a productive creative partnership with the artist, for whom he would create album art, set designs, and merchandise. Abloh was named creative director of West's agency, Donda, in 2010 and was nominated for a 2011 Grammy Award for art direction on West and fellow rapper Jay-Z's album *Watch the Throne*.

Abloh and West particularly connected over their shared interest in fashion and made headlines with their appearances at major fashion-industry events such as Paris Fashion Week. "We were a generation that was interested in fashion and weren't supposed to be there," he told Solway. "We saw this as our chance to participate and make current culture. In a lot of ways, it felt like we were bringing more excitement than the industry was." Not content to be solely consumers of fashion, Abloh and West both completed a six-month internship at the Italian fashion company Fendi in 2009.

The year 2009 also saw the opening of RSVP Gallery, a store in Chicago's Wicker Park neighborhood owned by Abloh, Marc Moran, and Don C. Specializing in streetwear, RSVP Gallery was quickly established as a venue for high-profile fashion-related events and as the launching point for products designed or inspired by hip-hop artists and other cultural influencers. The store also introduced some of Abloh's early fashion designs, including his Pyrex Vision collection of screen-printed shirts in 2012. For Abloh, the continued success of RSVP Gallery and his own design projects represent part of a shift in the fashion industry, which was transitioning from an industry of which trends set and controlled by established companies, publications, and celebrities to one in which young consumers and online influencers could alter the fashion landscape overnight. The industry's gatekeepers "lost their footing," he told Zach Baron for *GQ* magazine (1 Aug. 2016). "It's raining. Kids can push them over. I know kids who are half my age who

can kill a brand on a whim, make it uncool if they want to."

OFF-WHITE

Following the success of Pyrex Vision, Abloh founded his next streetwear label, Off-White, in Milan, Italy, in 2013. As the label's designer, he sought to continue to popularize high-end streetwear as well as to emphasize the legitimacy of that segment of the fashion industry, which had long been dismissed by the industry's gatekeepers. "In a large part streetwear is seen as cheap," Abloh opined to Christopher Morency for the *Business of Fashion* (29 Sept. 2016). "What my goal has been is to add an intellectual layer to it and make it credible." Having demonstrated an affinity for repurposing and reinterpreting existing clothing and imagery with Pyrex Vision, Abloh continued in that vein with Off-White and also went on to collaborate with established brands such as Nike, Levi's, and Jimmy Choo. Abloh cites a wide range of influences—from Renaissance painter Caravaggio to luxury brand Balenciaga to skateboarder brand Supreme to the Women's March on Washington—and freely mixes the images and ideas inspired by them.

After launching with menswear, Off-White introduced its first women's collection in 2014 and made its Paris Fashion Week debut that year. For Abloh, selling both men's and women's lines better enabled Off-White to reach its core audience, which included "girls wearing Céline and their boyfriend's [Nike] Air Force Ones," as he explained to Matthew Schneier for the *New York Times* (5 Nov. 2014). "My premise is to create a brand that's immersed in this young fashion customer," he told Schneier. "Me, as a designer, that's what I draw from, that's the culture that I'm a part of: the music, the restaurants, the Chateau [Marmont] to the Mercer. That sort of premise, that's where I'm at." Abloh launched a furniture collection under the Off-White brand, Grey Area, in 2016.

As Abloh established Off-White as an influential force in the streetwear sphere, the label earned extensive acclaim from both streetwear aficionados and the fashion-industry establishment: Abloh was named a finalist for the prestigious LVMH Young Designers Prize in 2015, and Off-White won the British Fashion Award in the urban luxe category in 2017.

LOUIS VUITTON

Although Abloh enjoyed running his own label, he long aspired one day to helm one of the fashion industry's large companies. "We've all got our little pontoon boats or whatever. Some might be bigger than others. The fashion house is the ocean cruise," he told Baron. He added, "It's got 7,000 people on it. You're steering it. That's my goal. I want to do that." A turning point in

Abloh's career came in March 2018, when he was selected to replace designer Kim Jones as artistic director for menswear for Louis Vuitton, a long-established fashion house and part of the LVMH group, which also owns Christian Dior, Fendi, Givenchy, and Bulgari, among other luxury fashion, jewelry, and cosmetics brands. "This opportunity to think through what the next chapter of design and luxury will mean at a brand that represents the pinnacle of luxury was always a goal in my wildest dreams," Abloh told Friedman and Paton following the company's announcement that he had taken the position. "And to show a younger generation that there is no one way anyone in this kind of position has to look is a fantastically modern spirit in which to start."

Accepting the Louis Vuitton position not only represents a major next step for Abloh but also marks the first time an African American has attained such a post in the European luxury fashion industry. The move has also enabled Abloh to rethink the brand's approach to menswear and draw from his extensive experience interacting with young fashion-forward streetwear buyers. Among other goals, he hoped to drum up interest in the Louis Vuitton brand among younger consumers, make clothing that reflects the realities of twenty-first-century life, and improve the brand's communications strategy and engagement with global issues. Abloh's first menswear collection for Louis Vuitton, the Spring 2019 collection, debuted in Paris in June 2018. That year, he was named among *Time* magazine's hundred most influential people of the year.

PERSONAL LIFE

Abloh met his future wife, Shannon, while they were in high school. The couple married in 2009 and have two children. Abloh was based in Chicago for much of his career but planned to move to Paris after joining Louis Vuitton.

Abloh has also retained a passion for deejaying, which he has described as similar in some ways to his design work. "You have three minutes to read the room, play a song, and impress the crowd. Then you have to figure out how to style this group of songs together so it's one point of view," he told Solway. "I'm literally just litmus-testing the culture." Abloh performs globally, both under his own name and under the stage name Flat White.

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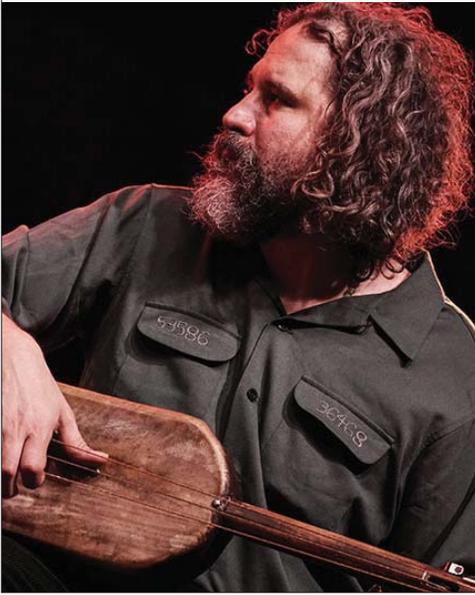
—Joy Crelin

Joshua Abrams

Date of birth: 1973

Occupation: Composer, musician

Jazz musician and composer Joshua Abrams is best known for performing with his collective, the Natural Information Society, beginning in the early 2010s, though he got his start in the Chicago jazz world nearly two decades earlier. The band is organized around Abrams's guimbri, a three-stringed Moroccan bass lute. The guimbri is an instrument central to Gnawa music, which developed for spiritual healing among enslaved black Africans in North Africa. Abrams's music with the Natural Information Society combines Gnawa elements with minimalist American jazz to create a repetitious yet meditative groove. "I like music with an undulating repetition, so that it sounds like it's repeating but there's constant change," he told Stuart Broomer for *Musicworks Magazine* (Fall 2015). He describes the group's work not in terms of making music, but "collectively building sonic environments," he told Will Schube in an interview for the blog *Bandcamp Daily* (16 May 2017). "We're weaving the music together as an ensemble, and once everyone's up to speed on a composition there's room for everyone to improvise and make choices



Hreinn Gudlaugsson, via Wikimedia Commons

within it.” The band’s 2017 album, *Simultaneity*, is also arguably its most successful, exhibiting the cohesion formed among the band after years of play.

MUSICAL EDUCATION

Abrams was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1973. He grew up in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where he made his auspicious musical start as an original member of the hip-hop group the Roots. Founded by Ahmir Khalib “QuestLove” Thompson and Tariq “Black Thought” Trotter as high schoolers, the Square Roots (as they were then called) busked on street corners in the late 1980s. Abrams, nicknamed the Original 808 for the bass-toned drum machine, played bass for the group and appeared on their 1993 debut, *Organix*. Around the same time, he performed in a chamber group conducted by the experimental composer Earle Brown. In the biography for his website, Abrams describes both experiences as “formative.”

Abrams enrolled at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, outside of Chicago, in 1991. Within a few years, Abrams became a fixture of the Chicago music scene. “For me, jazz is a social music and you gain some of the most important experience while you’re actually working,” he told Broomer of his musical education. “In Chicago at that time, there were still working bands, and I got to play often with members of different generations, which is different from learning jazz in college and then playing mostly with peers.” He cited the tenor saxophonist Lin Halliday and the guitarist Bobby Broom as particularly influential.

EARLY CAREER IN CHICAGO

By the mid-1990s, Abrams was serving as the house bassist for the Velvet Lounge, a renowned jazz nightclub in Chicago’s South Loop owned by tenor saxophonist Fred Anderson. Abrams also played in bands and recorded with such artists as composer and cornetist Rob Mazurek, the experimental rock band Joan of Arc, jazz pioneer Roscoe Mitchell, and the Montreal-based chamber-rock collective Godspeed You! Black Emperor.

In the late 1990s, Abrams joined the minimalist band Town and Country, with Ben Vida on guitar and trumpet, Liz Payne on contrabass, and Jim Dorling on harmonium. Abrams played not only bass for Town and Country, but also piano, drums, and a variety of melodic percussion instruments. The band released a handful of albums, including *It Has to Do with It* (2000) and the better-received *Up Above* (2006), throughout the early aughts.

Around 1998, Abrams formed a jazz/rock trio called Sticks and Stones along with drummer Chad Taylor and alto saxophonist Matana Roberts. The three met playing at the Velvet Lounge and went on to release *Sticks and Stones* in 2002 and *Shed Grace* in 2004.

In 2002, Abrams released a solo album called *Busride Interview*, for which he sampled and mixed instrumental music, electronic sound, and field recordings. The following year, he released *Cipher* under the name Josh Abrams through Delmark Records. He recorded it with an improvisational acoustic quartet including guitarist Jeff Parker, trumpeter Axel Dörner, and clarinetist-saxophonist Guillermo Gregorio. Aaron Steinberg, who reviewed the album for *Jazz Times* (1 Mar. 2004), wrote that Abrams allows each band member to shine, remarking, “With a light hand, Abrams steers the group through everyone’s comfort zones.”

In the years following, Abrams tried his hand at hip-hop production and released two albums under the stage name Reminder—*Continuum* and *West Side Cabin*—in 2005 and 2007, respectively. Around this time, from 2004 to 2008, Abrams also played a weekly club date with Parker and with John Herndon of the post-rock group the Tortoises.

ADOPTING THE GUIMBRI

Abrams began playing the guimbri on a trip to Morocco in 1998. “I had the chance to hear Gnawa music live in Marrakesch’s Jemaa El Fna. In Essaouira, I met Maâlem Najib Soudani, who gave me a basic understanding of the instrument, as well as my first guimbri,” he recalled to Broomer. Abrams wondered if it was right for him as a white man and outsider to continue to play the culturally significant instrument back in Chicago, but legendary jazz drummer Hamid Drake, who had recorded with renowned

Moroccan musician Mahmoud Ghania, encouraged him to pursue it. Enjoying making music with Drake, Abrams agreed.

In 2007, Abrams made his first guimbri recording—featuring the musicians of Town and Country and others under the name DRMWPN (pronounced “Dream Weapon”): a live LP recording called *Bright Blue Galilee*. His second recording playing the guimbri was a free jazz piece that year called “Sakti/Shiva,” on the LP *From the River to the Ocean*, as a member of a Drake and Anderson ensemble.

NATURAL INFORMATION SOCIETY

Abrams’s best known and most successful project, the Natural Information Society, got an important boost through a fortuitous connection. In 2008 and 2009, Abrams, vibraphonist Jason Adasiewicz, guitarist Emmett Kelly, and drummers Frank Rosaly and Noritaka Tanaka recorded solo, trio, and quartet psychedelic pieces drawing on Abrams’s past influences and featuring his Gnawa-inspired guimbri playing. The result would be the album *Natural Information*.

After playing a show with the folk musician Bonnie “Prince” Billy, Abrams struck up a conversation with Eremita Records founder Michael Ehlers. Ehlers mentioned that he was moving cross-country. Abrams, thinking that the company was on hiatus, gave Ehlers a demo of the album to listen to on the drive. “In retrospect, I think he feared it was a pitch; he told me he had stopped the label so I didn’t have any expectations when I passed it to him,” Abrams recalled to Schube. “Ironically, on that ride, he got really into the recording and asked if he could release it on vinyl. That became the first record, and it all went from there.” *Natural Information* was released under Abrams’s name through Eremita Records in 2010.

The Natural Information Society is based on Abrams’s three principles of “focus, continuity, and repetition,” Schube noted. These goals invoke both the ceremonial tradition of the guimbri and the minimalism of certain forms of experimental jazz. Ben Ratliff, who reviewed *Natural Information* for the *New York Times* (19 Sept. 2010), described it as “one of the rough gems of the post-everything musical era.” Ratliff observed, “Every piece . . . is quiet and commanding, bound by its own mysterious glue.”

Abrams and the Natural Information Society released their second album, *Representing*, in 2012. Abrams made the album in his apartment, bringing in different small ensembles to record. That year, the Natural Information Society officially coalesced around a core duo of Abrams and Rosaly.

LATER ALBUMS

In 2015 the Natural Information Society—by then a revolving group of musicians that include Abrams, Rosaly, Kelly, drummer Mikel Avery, autoharpist Ben Boye, and percussionist Lisa Alvarado on gong and harmonium—began to tour. They released a two-disc album called *Magnetoception* the same year. The album featured longer grooves like the long, understated, drone-heavy “By Way of Odessa.” “Although the music is hypnotic,” Bill Meyer wrote in his review for *Dusted* magazine (8 June 2015), “trance doesn’t lead to easy bliss. The guitars add grit as well as languor, commanding sharpened attention rather than drift. The Gnawa use their music to banish demons and ease suffering; Abrams uses his to draw us into a state that is altered but quite alert.”

Automaginary, a collaboration between Natural Information Society and the ambient rock duo Bitchin Bajas, was also released in 2015. Aaron Leitko, who reviewed that record for *Pitchfork* magazine, rated it 7.9 out of 10.

When Abrams and the Natural Information Society’s album *Simultaneity* was released in 2017, *Rolling Stone* magazine named one of the 20 Best Avant Albums of the year. Marc Masters echoed Abrams’s views on the joy of repetition when he wrote in *Pitchfork* (6 Apr. 2017) that *Simultaneity* creates “a sound that moves forward while simultaneously seeming to freeze time.” Masters wrote, “Abrams’ simple figures can continually hold attention across long stretches because his tone is so rich and multi-layered. Throughout *Simultaneity*, his playing forms the foundation of each song, offering his bandmates a core around which they can circle, fly, digress, and connect.”

In 2018, Abrams received a Foundation for Contemporary Arts grant in recognition of his innovation in music and sound.

COMPOSING FOR THE BIG SCREEN

Abrams is also a film score composer, working primarily with the documentary filmmaker Steve James. James contacted Abrams after listening to *Natural Information*. Abrams agreed to compose the score for James’s *The Interrupters* (2011), a documentary about a group of Chicago antiviolenace activists—six weeks before the film premiered at the Sundance Film Festival. Abrams worked with James again in 2014, composing the score for *Life Itself*, a biopic about the film critic Roger Ebert, then recently deceased.

Eremita Records released the two scores together as an album in 2015. Reviewing that album for *Pitchfork* (4 Nov. 2015), Leitko wrote: “Watching the films, Abrams’ music is never intrusive. It enhances a scene, but never forces a mood. And while it’s probably not the first place you’d turn to experience his work, it provides an

example of his stylistic reach and musical ability.” Abrams also composed the scores for Bill Siegel’s documentary *The Trials of Muhammad Ali* (2013) and James’s Academy Award–nominated short *Abacus: Small Enough to Jail* (2016).

PERSONAL LIFE

Abrams lives in Chicago with his spouse, Lisa Alvarado, a fellow musician in the Natural Information Society and visual artist. In 2017, Alvarado presented her first New York solo exhibit, *Sound Talisman*, featuring the painted textiles used as backdrops for the Natural Information Society’s performances. She also designs the group’s cover art.

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SELECTED WORKS

Natural Information, 2010; *Representing*, 2012; *Magnetoception*, 2015; *Simultaneity*, 2017

—Molly Hagan

Joseph Acaba

Date of Birth: May 17, 1967

Occupation: Astronaut

Although many of the United States’ astronauts are drawn directly from the military and the scientific community, Joseph Acaba came from a less common source: a middle-school classroom. A former math and science teacher, he was one of three educators accepted in 2004 into a new National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) program focused on training teachers to travel into space as mission specialists. Although NASA’s program might seem unusual to some, Acaba found his teaching background to be an asset to his work. “I think the teaching profession really gets you pretty well qualified to become an astronaut,” he told Clara Moskowitz for *Space.com* (28 Sept. 2012). “It may not seem that way, but schoolteachers every day, they’re in a stressful environment, every day is different, and you need to cope with a wide range of people and different experiences.”

Acaba’s academic background in geology and years of service in the US Marine Corps Reserve and the Peace Corps also helped prepare him for his first trip to the International Space Station (ISS), taken via the space shuttle *Discovery* in 2009. Following the success of his first mission, Acaba returned to the ISS for an extended expedition in 2012, living aboard the station for several months. He again traveled to the ISS aboard a Russian *Soyuz* spacecraft in September 2017 for an expedition scheduled to last until February 2018. Although far from Earth, Acaba found



By NASA [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

OBITUARIES

Amsale Aberra

Born: Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; March 1, 1954

Died: New York, New York; April 1, 2018

Occupation: Fashion designer

Amsale Aberra is most well known for her simple, minimalist wedding dress designs. Celebrities like Julia Roberts, Halle Berry, and Katharine Gershman have worn her dresses, and her work has also appeared in films such as *Runaway Bride*, *27 Dresses*, and *The Hangover*.

Amsale Aberra was born in 1954 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, to Aberra Moltot and Tsadale Assamnew. Her father, Moltot, was the vice minister of national community development in Emperor Haile Selassie's government. In 1974, Aberra moved to Poultney, Vermont, to study commercial art at Green Mountain College. However, during her first year of studies, Haile Selassie's government was overthrown, and her father was imprisoned. Unable to pay for her college tuition, Aberra moved to Boston to live with her half-sister, Aster Yilma. By working small jobs, Aberra was able to support herself in attending Boston State College where she received a degree in political science in 1981. While waitressing at a coffee shop, Aberra met her husband, Clarence O'Neil Brown III. After graduating, Aberra moved with Brown to New York City where she attended the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT), graduating in 1982 with a degree in fashion design. After graduation Aberra began working as a showroom manager for designer Harvé Benard and eventually became his design assistant. While planning her wedding in 1985, Aberra discovered that no designers were making the simple, elegant wedding dresses she desired, so she designed her own dress. After her success, Aberra placed an advertisement in a national bridal magazine. Receiving many calls for gowns, Aberra and her husband launched the Amsale Bridal Collection, operating out of her loft apartment. In 1990, Aberra sold her first designs to Kleinfeld's, the country's largest wedding-dress retailer. In 1997 she opened her own boutique, Nouvelle Amsale, on Madison Avenue, selling evening gowns, cocktail dresses, and evening separates. Aberra became a leader in New York's black business community and has received many awards, including the Legacy Award at the 2012 Black Enterprise Women of Power Summit. She has twice been listed among *Ebony* magazine's Power 150 list of influential African Americans. She also served on the board of the Ethiopian Children's Fund.

Aberra is survived by her husband and their daughter, Rachel. Her father, Moltot, and her half-sister, Aster, also survive.

See *Current Biography* 2005

Daniel K. Akaka

Born: Honolulu, Hawaii; September 11, 1924

Died: Honolulu, Hawaii; April 6, 2018

Occupation: US Senator

Daniel Akaka was the first native Hawaiian to serve in either house of the US Congress. A liberal Democrat, Akaka spent much of his career dedicated to advocating for the rights of native Hawaiians, welfare, and environmental protection.

Daniel Akaka was born in Honolulu, Hawaii, to Annie and Kahikina Akaka. He attended Kamehameha School and graduated in 1942 before joining the US Army Corps of Engineers at the end of World War II. After serving, Akaka attended the University of Hawaii and received a bachelor's degree in education in 1952. From 1953 to 1960, Akaka taught elementary school and eventually became a vice principal. He was appointed as principal of the school in 1963. Akaka received a master's degree in education from the University of Hawaii in 1966 and then went to work as the chief programming planner for the Hawaii Department of Education. From 1971 to 1974, Akaka served as the director of the Office of Economic Opportunity and then from 1975 to 1976, served as the director for the Progressive Neighborhoods program. During this same year, Akaka served as the human-resources special assistant to the governor of Hawaii. In 1976, Akaka won the Democratic nomination for Hawaiian Second District Congressman and thus became the first native Hawaiian to serve in either house of the US Congress. Akaka served for fourteen years in the US House of Representatives and held a seat on the Appropriations Committee. In 1990, Akaka was elected to the US Senate and was re-elected in 1994, 2000, and 2006. Akaka decided to retire in 2011. During his time in Congress, Akaka pushed for legislation for the US government to apologize for overthrowing the Hawaiian government in 1893 and for compensation to restore homelands wrongfully taken by the US government.

Akaka is survived by his wife, Mary Mildred Chong, their five children, Millannie, Daniel Jr., Gerard, Alan, and Nicholas, and several grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

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