Estelle Pau-On Lau was born in Honolulu, Hawaii in 1924. Her parents had journeyed from Zhong Shan, Guangdong, China to Hawaii as teenagers, and began creating a successful business and a grand family. Estelle was the second youngest of 11 children – 9 girls and 2 boys. Her given name is Pau-On Lau, and her personal name On means peace. But when she went to first grade the neighbor said she needed an “American name” - and thus she became known as Estelle, which means star.

Estelle's application to live at the I-House described her “extreme interest in meeting and becoming acquainted with all peoples.” While majoring in American and Chinese history, she participated in all aspects of I-House life, including performances of traditional hula dances she had learned in Hawaii. She is pictured with her roommates in the I-House historical display featuring the Daily Cal article describing student life during World War II, when GIs were housed at the I-House and students moved into fraternity housing: “A Chinese girl from Hawaii, a black girl from the South, and a white girl requested to live together, and their room was always a center of activity.” The I-House team would later describe her as a “charming and attractive girl, vivacious, active, deeply interested in I-House.”

She went on to do graduate work at the University of Chicago and Columbia University – at both universities she lived at the International House. Indeed, the mailing tube for her Cal diploma shows her next address upon graduation was the International House at the University of Chicago, where she continued to perform at I-House events.

When she returned to the Bay Area as a young historian for the 1951 signing of the peace treaty between the United State and Japan, she stayed at the I-House. Upon returning to Moorhead, MN where she was a professor at the time, the local paper wrote up her story as front page news. Growing up in Hawaii, she witnessed the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and so when she attended the signing of the peace treaty with Japan, she became one of the few people – indeed, perhaps the only person – to have personally witnessed both the beginning and the end of the war in the Pacific.
During that stay at the I-House in 1951, she met a graduate student, Mason Gaffney. As he was playing guitar in the Great Hall while another student sang, Estelle appeared on the balcony, and their eyes met. They married the following year at the I-House in 1952, in a beautiful ceremony written up in the Daily Cal.

As they moved across the country and raised a family together, she maintained her lifelong commitment to the I-House mission “to foster intercultural respect, understanding, lifelong friendships, and leadership skills to promote a more tolerant and peaceful world.” She received her PhD from Marquette University and became an acclaimed professor at the University of the Pacific in Stockton, California, where she specialized in cross-cultural education and women’s studies. Upon retirement in 2000, she received the university’s highest honor, the Order of Pacific, in recognition of her lifelong commitment to social justice and cross-cultural understanding.

Estelle spent her retirement in Albany, California, where she could be near her children Brad, Ann and Stuart, their spouses Tom and John, and her granddaughter Meredith, as well as the loving extended family of nieces, nephews, and lifelong friends. Living in Albany also made it possible for her to participate once more in I-House events, and she attended the I-House annual gala in 2017. We all miss her very much, and are deeply grateful for the opportunity to celebrate her life together with the I-House community at her memorial held in the Auditorium in May 2019.