

Lilly Irinaga – Oregon Senate Testimony – 2/18/2016
Minoru Yasui Hearing –
Asking to Establish March 28th of Every Year as
Minoru Yasui Day in Oregon

Chair Rosenbaum and Members of the Committee,
My name is Lilly Irinaga.

I feel very privileged for this Chance to Share with your Committee:
My Story, about a Nisei, which means the Second-Generation
of Japanese-Americans, born in the USA.
I was born in Portland, Oregon in 1929 -- an American Citizen.

So, I have been a Native Oregonian my entire life, as was my late
husband Fred, who was also born in Portland, in 1922.
Together we grew up, went to school, got engaged, then married,
and worked in Portland.
We raised our Family of 4 children in Beaverton, Oregon.
My eldest son, Michael, is here with me today in support of this
legislation too.

We are Proud Duck Fans; because both my husband and I went to the
University of Oregon in Eugene.
Fred graduated in Business from the UofO in the late 1940s,
as a WWII Veteran on the GI Bill.
He became a Successful Entrepreneur and built several businesses,
including several car washes; where he worked with his two brothers -
Tex and Henry, who were also WWII veterans.
The family businesses were able to support three families, and helped
put most of the kids through college.
I graduated from Marylhurst College in Lake Oswego, and became an
elementary school teacher at Buckman Grade School in SE Portland in
the early 1950s; and I later worked as a Special Education Substitute
Teacher in the Beaverton School District.

Prior to WWII:

My father, Toru Kobayashi and my mother, Sakae Fujihara, came to Oregon, separately...

as young teenagers with their parents from Japan in the early 1900s. They were called Issei, the First-Generation of Japanese-Americans to Immigrate to the United States of America ---to this Land of Freedom and Opportunity.

My parents decided to stay in America, the Country of their Choice.

My mom went to middle school in Portland, and my dad graduated from Benson High School. They met for the first time in Portland, and were married at the old Epworth Methodist Church in the Northwest part of town.

My dad became a Machinist for the Union Pacific Railroad in Portland. Later, he attended and graduated from the Western States College of Chiropractic in Portland, in the late 1930s. His chiropractic knowledge came in handy when he taught Judo to local men and boys, as a black-belt Judo Sensei.

Together they operated the Chester Hotel in SW Portland. My mother "made the beds", and my father did all of the maintenance work. They worked long hours and never took vacations.

I remember that we took occasional car rides with friends to go to picnics, because when I was young we didn't own a car.

I was happy to go to school at Shattuck Elementary; and had great fun playing with my many Caucasian and Asian friends. And I really liked playing with my Shirley Temple doll.

I have fond memories as a 12-year-old girl; walking down in the late afternoons to the Stop in downtown Portland, where I would meet my Dad as he got off the street-car he rode, after his shift was over at Union Pacific. And then we would walk home to the Chester Hotel together....

Then, on December 7th, 1941 Everything Changed: Pearl Harbor and the beginning of WWII with Japan.

We were always proud Americans... but suddenly, the country is overcome, Blinded by the Hysteria of War --- singling out all people of Japanese Heritage, including Japanese-American Citizens, on the West Coast for Incarceration.

The U.S. government looked upon us as Foreigners, not as Americans, and Mistaking us as people loyal to the country of Japan....

The U.S. totally Forgot.... My parents Chose America, This is Our Home!... As young adults, my parents had left Japan forever!

On the morning of Dec 7th, we heard on the radio the shocking news of the attack on Pearl Harbor. At the time, we really didn't know what that would mean to us....

That same evening, because we already had tickets, my parents and I went to a Performance of a visiting Singing & Dancing Troupe from Japan, at the Norse Hall in NE Portland.

At the Intermission, I remember some official looking men coming into the Hall; which I later found out were from the FBI. They announced over the speaker-system the Names of a dozen or more Issei men, including my own Dad's Name, ordering them to immediately assemble in the lobby. I ran to see my father; and I saw him, along with the others being hand-cuffed in the lobby, then being scurried outside into the night....

From that scary night, my Mom and I Did Not See my Dad for Two and a half years.

We received only edited letters from him. The pages he sent had whole sentences actually cut-out with scissors; mailed from Prison Camps and Penitentiaries from Places like: Missoula, Montana; Fort Sill, Oklahoma; Camp Livingston, Louisiana; Santa Fe, New Mexico; and Crystal City, Texas.

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, through General John Dewitt, ordered all Japanese on the West Coast to abide by many new, so called: "Exclusion Orders".
Exclusion Orders of a Curfew, Exclusion Orders for a Pending Evacuation...Orders... so many Orders, Over 50, and All so Restrictive.

My parents lost almost everything they had worked so hard to achieve. We were, like other families, in a panic...

When Executive Order 9066 for Evacuation was issued, we were given just days to dispose of everything we owned, from our business to the family furniture, and family heirlooms.

I remember that we were allowed to only bring the few possessions that we could carry with us.

I sadly remember having to leave my Shirley Temple doll behind because there was no room in my suitcase, when my mom and I were forced to leave our home.....

Then, we found ourselves inside a terrible Livestock Yard...
"The Portland Assembly Center" Min Yasui called it a Pig Pen.
I remember that it smelled horrible, like horse manure.
We had no privacy...each family was cramped into stinky, little plywood stalls where we lived and slept.

This was a Temporary "Way-Station", located at what is now the Portland Exposition Center.
We were held there while the Government, we found out later, was building the 10 Interior Incarceration, or Concentration Camps -- all located in Desolate Areas; where eventually 110,000 to 120,000 Japanese-Americans like me, would be transported to live.

Our next Move was to the American Concentration Camp that Mom and I, and many of our friends from Portland, were assigned to: Minidoka, Idaho.

From the time we got off the train, I remember dust all over the place, dust flying everywhere, and into our flimsy Barracks. We had to survive...we built "walk-ways", and started schools... We did not have enough tables or desks... thank goodness for the Quakers and the Red Cross that sent us equipment.

We elected a Block Manager, and a Chief Cook for our mess hall. To this day, I still remember my address in Camp, it was: Block 3412 G Our only shopping option was ordering from the Sears or Montgomery Ward Catalogs.

My husband's family was also incarcerated at Minidoka. It was from here that Fred, a young 21 yr. old Nisei, had the "Courage" to become one of the first men to Volunteer in 1943; for what would become the storied -- 442nd Regimental Combat Team.

He wanted to show his Loyalty to the United States of America by Volunteering to "Fight for his Country".

Fred was inducted into the US Army at Fort Benning, Georgia.

He became a Sargent, and as part of the "Cadre", he helped to train Soldiers in his Unit. Later, he Volunteered to become a Paratrooper, jumping out of Airplanes ... I think that's how he got the Nickname: "Fearless".

After that, he went on to the Military Intelligence School (MIS) at Fort Snelling, Minnesota - to the Japanese Language School located there.

Min Yasui, also had the "Courage" to stand up to Unjust Incarceration. I've known Min's younger sister, Yuka, since our College Days at the University of Oregon. Both she, and her brother, Dr. Homer Yasui, and his wife Miki, have been long-time family friends of Fred and me.

The removal of my Family, and the Yasui Family, and the Thousands of other Japanese-American Families was an: "Historic Mistake of Unprecedented Magnitude"!

My Parents and their Peers were the ones who Suffered the most. Unfortunately, they passed on. They never knew that America finally admitted its huge blunder, and officially apologized.

Through those dark years, Minoru Yasui was the "Light of Hope" to our Community.... He stood -up against this Mistake of the United States government.

I, along with Thousands of others, will "Never Forget" the Loss of Freedom, the Loss of Identity, and the Loss of Dignity for those Years we spent behind barbed wires...

I want my Four kids: Mike, Chris, Doug and Todd; and their Spouses; and My 8 Grandchildren; and Future Generations: to "Never Forget" the lessons of the "Injustice of the Incarceration"...

Because what we went through Affects All Americans -- Then and Now!

Ironically, my youngest son Todd, is a longtime FBI Agent in California. He was on the team that interrogated Saddam Hussein, in Iraq, when he was captured.

Several years ago, Todd and I attended the Congressional Gold Medal Event in Washington DC; where the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, the 100th Infantry Battalion, and the Military Intelligence Service were Collectively Awarded the Medal.

Each Veteran, living and passed, was honored for his "Go For Broke" Service, Sacrifice and Loyalty in "Fighting for America"; even while many of their Parents and other Family Members were held in American Concentration Camps.

I have a replica of the Congressional Gold Medal for my late husband Fred, that I would like to show you. (Hold up Medal to display)

**Min Yasui Never Gave Up his Fight for Justice; So he Should be a
"Beacon of Light" for All Oregonians & All Americans.**

**We need Freedom & Justice for Americans of every Race, Color,
Ethnic-Group, Age, Religion, Sex or Lifestyle.**

**Remembering Min Yasui every March 28th is a Significant & Symbolic
Reminder -- that "America Should Never Forget"!**

**That's what Fred Believed -- that's what Min Believed --
and that's what I Believe!**

Thank you very much for this Opportunity to Share My Story.

**Lilly M. Irinaga
A Proud Daughter, Wife, Mother & Grandmother
A Proud Oregonian
A Proud American Citizen**