

TO EXTEND HELPING HANDS ONCE OFFERED TO US

By Kenji Murase



NJASRC Archives

NJASRC co-eds Yoshiko Uchida, Mari (Mastumoto) Fobes, Chizu (Kitano) Iiyama, Nobu (Kumekawa) Hibino, University of California, Berkeley, 1940s.

In February, 1942 President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066 authorizing the mass removal of 110,000 Japanese Americans residing on the West Coast and their incarceration in concentration camps in the interior. Among them were 2500 college students whose further education seemed foreclosed by their forced internment in camps.

In March, 1942, in the midst of the evacuation of Japanese Americans, a group made up of representatives of the Young Men's and Young Women's Christian Associations (YMCA-YWCA), the Western College Association, college presidents, educators, religious leaders and civic minded citizens met in Berkeley, CA. They were appalled by the racial injustice of the eviction and internment and they were troubled by the plight of the interned college students. They prevailed upon Governor Olson to communicate their concern to President Roosevelt, who turned to Eleanor Roosevelt. Eleanor Roosevelt feared the prospect of Japanese Americans becoming permanent wards of the government, as in the case of Native Americans. She wanted to demonstrate to the evictees that their internment was only temporary. She then called upon Clarence Pickett of the American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker service organization. Pickett proposed to John McCloy, Assistant

Secretary of War, and Milton Eisenhower, Director of the War Relocation Authority (WRA), that the college students in camp be relocated. In May, 1942 a committee, called the National Japanese American Student Relocation Council (NJASRC), was appointed to formulate policies and a program to relocate Japanese American students from camp to college.

The task of the NJASRC was to help the students secure clearances from the FBI, the WRA and, if the student had ever visited Japan, the War Department, in order to leave camp. In addition, the Council contacted colleges and processed necessary admissions applications, transcripts, references and information on the students' financial situations. The Council also had to obtain assurances that the students would be welcomed by the colleges and their surrounding communities. In many cases, the Council negotiated placement of individual students in suitable colleges and secured financing for their tuition and living expenses.

In its four years of operation, May, 1942 through June, 1946, the Council processed and relocated some 4000 students to 680 institutions of higher learning across the country. This work was done without government funding

and almost entirely by unpaid volunteers. Many Japanese Americans are still unaware of the fact that anyone who left camp for college during this period would have had to receive an official clearance obtained by the Council. In retrospect one may ask: What would have been the future of the Nisei and subsequent generations of Japanese Americans without the Council's program of relocating students from camp to college?

The Nisei Response

Among the 4000 who left camp for college was a small group of Nisei who settled in the Boston area. They included Lafayette and Mayme (Kishi) Noda from New Hampshire by way of Livingston, CA; Yosh and Nobu (Kumekawa) Hibino from Connecticut by way of Berkeley and San Francisco; and Tets and May (Oshima) Takayanagi from Massachusetts by way of Berkeley and Oakland. They all had successful careers in higher education, the sciences, business and the professions. They called themselves "the New England Nisei" and they met annually for Oshogatsu (New Year's celebration). While reminiscing about camp life and reflecting upon their current good fortune, they recognized that their success was largely due to their college education, which had been made possible by the help of the Council.

In the summer of 1979, at a picnic on the Noda's blueberry farm in New Hampshire, the New England Nisei concluded that it was time to acknowledge their indebtedness to the Council and to honor and memorialize those who had helped them to leave camp and continue their education. They decided to establish a permanent memorial called the Nisei Student Relocation Commemorative Fund (NSRC Fund). The NSRC Fund would serve several purposes: first, to remind the nation of the disenfranchisement of a minority group, their forced removal and incarceration in concentration camps during World War II; second, to commemorate and pay tribute to the National Japanese American Student Relocation Council; and third, to lend a helping hand to needy refugee and immigrant high school seniors to continue their education.

Ongaeshi

Establishment of the NSRC Fund symbolized the expression of one of the core values transmitted by Issei parents to their Nisei children—*on* and *ongaeshi*. *On* is an obligation one incurs to another person for generosity and assistance at a time of need. *Ongaeshi* is the act of recognizing and returning *on*, or giving thanks for acts of kindness, or repayment of a moral debt. The concept of *ongaeshi* is captured in this statement of Yutaka Kobayashi, president of the Fund:

I am one of the 4000 Nisei who benefited from this [NJASRC] program. The lesson that the Nisei and subsequent generations of Japanese Americans should remember is that our present good fortune is due to those people of good will, for the most part unknown to us, who

gave us a lift in a critical time in our history. They helped us when all persons of Japanese ancestry were suspect and considered the enemy. In this atmosphere of fear and hate, people of good will came forth to help the displaced college students. Their efforts put them at great political, social and even physical risk. To me, this represents the finest in American tradition. To step up to help those in need irrespective of color or creed, irrespective of the tenor of the times. Supporting the Fund is my way of repaying a debt I owe to all the known and unknown benefactors who gave me a chance at the brass ring by helping me to go to college from Tanforan [assembly center] and Topaz [internment camp]. I hope my small effort will serve as an example to others who would like to repay the faith and courage of those who gave them a similar opportunity over 50 years ago.

The Beneficiaries

In the late 1970s news stories focused on the plight of the Southeast Asian refugees and the "boat people." In 1979, the same year that the New England Nisei were planning the NSRC Fund, some 150,000 refugees from Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam sought protection in the United States. They were also victims of war, uprooted from their homes, interned in camps, and their children's education was disrupted. The founders of the NSRC Fund recognized that the experiences of Japanese Americans and Southeast Asian refugees were superficially similar although vastly different in the scale of personal suffering and devastation. This recognition made the case for extending help to the children of the refugee families all the more compelling.

Beginning in 1983, the NSRC Fund began awarding scholarships each year to high school students of Southeast Asian refugee families from Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. As of 2001, the Fund has awarded over \$225,000 to some 318 Southeast Asian students in 18 cities across the country. The awards have increased from \$4000 granted to eight students in the San Francisco Bay Area in 1983 to \$35,000 given to 34 students in Merced, CA in 2001. Other awards sites have been Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles,



2000 NSRC Board Members with local committee members and several recipients. 2000 NSRC Fund award ceremony. Boston, MA

Minneapolis, Houston, Denver, Philadelphia, Seattle, Stockton (CA), Sacramento, Fresno, New York City, San Diego, Madison (WI), and Hickory (NC). Atlanta is scheduled to be the site for 2002 and Portland (OR) for 2003.

Early on it became apparent that among the Southeast Asian refugees, the Hmong people from the mountain regions of Laos were experiencing the greatest difficulty in becoming integrated into American life. Until recent times, they had no written language and many were illiterate. With little or no formal education, few employable skills and burdened with large families, Hmong refugees depended largely upon public assistance. Given their economic circumstances and the level of their assimilation, the need for help to Hmong students seemed especially urgent. Therefore, the NSRC Fund focused upon areas with large Hmong settlements, such as Wisconsin (Madison, 1998), North Carolina (Hickory, 1999), and the Central Valley of California (Stockton, 1993; Sacramento, 1994; Fresno, 1995; and Merced, 2001).

The Recipients

The 318 Southeast Asian students awarded scholarships during the period 1983 through 2001 represent an astonishing array of talent, strength and perseverance. The qualities they display and their responses to the scholarship award are reflected in the following examples:

Phuong Tang (New York City, 1996), one of the "boat people," recalls the ordeal of her journey of nine sweltering days and frigid nights drifting aimlessly in the perilous China Sea. They cringed in fear whenever another vessel was sighted. The sea was infested with Thai pirates who would not hesitate to torture, rape or kill refugees for their precious possessions of gold and jewelry. They also faced the peril of hunger, thirst and rampant illness. Many soon died and their bodies thrown overboard. Phuong says, "We reached the point when we were so exhausted by the seemingly hopeless situation that we simply could take no more when we were miraculously rescued and brought to Hong Kong." It took another two lengthy, tedious and arduous years of living in an overpopulated refugee camp before Phuong and her family could relocate to America. Phuong

hopes to pursue a career in medicine following her studies at New York University.

Some of the scholarship recipients came to the US as "unaccompanied minors" orphaned by the war or entrusted to strangers by their parents, who saw no future for them in the refugee camps. Thanh Vo (Minneapolis, 1989) was 15 and her sister 11 when they arrived unaccompanied from a refugee camp in Thailand. The NSRC Fund scholarship helped her graduate with a degree in aerospace engineering. While working full time for four years, she earned an MA degree in mechanical engineering. She went on to become a systems designer working on automated machines. Along the way, she helped her younger sister through pharmacy school and enabled three others sisters and her parents to emigrate to Australia in 1990. She was finally able to visit her parents in 1991 for a joyful reunion.

Sean Yan (Philadelphia, 1990) had not attended school in Cambodia as he was forced into slave labor when he was age 8. He escaped from the labor camp and spent a week living on wild vegetation and sleeping in trees to protect himself from preying animals. Reunited with his family, they tried twice to escape to the Thai border. After periods of internment in refugee camps in Thailand and Indonesia, he was finally relocated and settled in Pennsylvania. Sean graduated second in his class in high school. In his acceptance speech, he said: "I am thrilled that there are organizations such as yours which offer opportunities to young dreamers such as I am. I know I have the ability, but I need the opportunity."

For Hmong women students, the scholarship helped change family attitudes about education and the role of women. Sheng Vang (Sacramento, 1998), from a family of 11, said: "The scholarship really changed my dad's mind about letting me go to college. He never thought I could win anything because I am a girl. He went to get the scholarship with me. I could almost see tears in his eyes because he was so proud of me. The scholarship really changed my dad's perspective on me going to college. This is a big deal to me. It means a lot to me. It gave me the feeling that I am somebody."



1996 NSRC Fund award recipients. New York City, NY.



1999 NSRC Fund award recipients and local committee. Hickory, NC.

The amazing story of Phuoc Van Le (Sacramento, 1994) reflects the caliber of the students helped by the Fund. Phuoc, the oldest of four children in a family abandoned by the father, fled Vietnam by boat in 1981. Rescued at sea by a cargo ship that took them to Hong Kong, they were relocated first to Kansas and finally settled in Sacramento. He ranked first in his graduating class of 279 students in 1994. Phuoc was awarded the most prestigious scholarship offered by Dartmouth College, paying for tuition and living expenses for four years. However, the NSRCF scholarship had special meaning because "They are recognizing our struggle and perseverance and success at overcoming obstacles to get where we are today. They struggled like we did and now they want to help us." Despite having to take a year leave to help out his family, Phuoc graduated from Dartmouth and is now attending medical school at Stanford University. His goal is to work as a physician in an international context, focusing on those with the greatest need.

Procedure and Finances

At each scholarship project site, the Fund appoints a chair to organize a local scholarship committee to be composed of representatives of Southeast Asian refugee communities, refugee service agencies, Japanese American organizations such as the Japanese American Citizens League, other civic organizations, churches and the school system. This committee recruits and selects the scholarship recipients. Although the local committee is not required to raise funds, in most projects the Fund's grant is supplemented by local financial support. In the Seattle project (1991) the local committee raised \$7000 to match the NSRC Fund grant of \$7000.

For its income, the Fund depends mainly upon annual contributions from some 600 individual Japanese Americans all across the country, plus donations from community organizations, corporations and foundations, and bequests. Currently, after 20 years, the Fund's assets stand at approximately \$750,000. The Fund has no paid staff. Its work is done entirely by unpaid board members, volunteers and local scholarship committees. Therefore, 95 percent of its income goes directly into the scholarship fund.

The NSRCF Legacy

A tribute to the NSRC Fund is offered by John W. Nason, who was president of Swarthmore College when he accepted the daunting task of heading up the original National Japanese American Student Relocation Council in 1942. Writing more than fifty years later in 1996, he had this to say:

Of all the things I have done in a long life, my work with the National Japanese American Student Relocation Council gives me the greatest satisfaction. The work of the Council was an attempt to compensate in a small way for the enormous injustice and suffering caused by the 1942 evacuation. One of its premises was the conviction that the entry or re-entry of the younger generation of Japanese Americans into colleges and universities was essential to their sense of identity as Americans and to their future leadership of Japanese American society.

We believed in you, but we did not know what magnificent contributions you would make to the country in your work and lives. It is a record of which you can be proud. And now for the past 16 years, through the Nisei Student Relocation Commemorative Fund, you have been helping young people from Southeast Asia, who have come to start new lives in America, get a college education as you did half a century ago. You have set yourselves an impressive and moving program and are carrying it out with enthusiasm and distinction. *

Readers interested in further information or wishing to make a contribution may write to the Nisei Student Relocation Commemorative Fund, 19 Scenic Drive, Portland, CT 06480.

Sources:

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2000 NSRC Fund award recipients. Boston, MA.



2001 NSRC Fund award recipients. Merced, CA.