

GAY NIKKEI PIONEERS

By Eric C. Wat

When I first met and interviewed Tak Yamamoto in 1997, he was almost sixty years old. At the time, he was still coordinating the annual pilgrimage to Manzanar for the Manzanar Committee, to which he had belonged since 1975. Tak was only three when his family was forced to relocate to the internment camp in Poston, Arizona. Although he remembered very little of that experience, it was important to him that this page of American history would not be left out of the community memory. So when he met Sue Kunitomi Embrey, the Committee's founding chair, he did not miss the opportunity to join the organization.

"She knew I was gay," Tak tells me. "All of the members of the Manzanar Committee and I talked about it, and they got to meet my partner Carl. Then in 1976, I joined JACL. By that time, I was finding some acceptance by straights, Asian Pacific straights. That was important to me."

Around the same time, June Lagmay was schooling her professors and fellow students at University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) about what it meant to be an Asian lesbian. Born in Yokohama, Japan, to a Filipino American serviceman and a Japanese national, Lagmay grew up in Echo Park, where she met her partner Rita in high school. She began attending UCLA in 1975. When a sociology class on deviant behavior included homosexuality in its syllabus, June addressed the class and told them she was a lesbian.

"The whole topic started to ride on me because what Rita and I had was so natural and so good. In a philosophy class, my paper was on why it is unreasonable philosophically to say that homosexuality is wrong," she remembers. "And born-again Christians would pester me at lunch and tried to convert me. I would get into these voracious philosophic arguments with them. I was so fired up then that if I got people telling me that I was a sinner and going to hell, I liked it. It was like, I got a reaction out of you!"

At a time when the issue of homosexuality barely registered a blip on the Asian American radar, Tak Yamamoto, June Lagmay and other Japanese Americans refused to live in anonymity. Nowhere did they wear their sexuality more proudly than in their home community. In 1980, Tak and June, with a close circle of both Asian and non-Asian friends, founded Asian/Pacific Lesbians and Gays (A/PLG), the first organization of its kind in Los Angeles. As the organization was building its infrastructure the first year, Lagmay agreed to serve as its co-chair with her dear friend Paul Chen. They had met earlier at the Gay and Lesbian Community Service Center. Being two of a small handful of Asian Americans working at the Center at the time, it did not take long for Chen and Lagmay to find each other.

"I remember sometime around that time Morris Kight, who knew me and Paul and Tak and Roy Kawasaki and a

number of other people, asked us to come to his house, which to me was like going to the house of God," says June. "Morris has such a wonderful reputation for being such a patriotic father of the gay and lesbian movement. He would say, 'You got to have a way of expressing yourselves and don't depend on the European community to do that.' I never forgot that." That meeting at Kight's house was Asian/Pacific Lesbians and Gays' first. The organization still exists today.

Some of June's most vivid memories of those days include staffing an A/PLG booth at Nisei Week festivals. Indeed, not satisfied by having its own safe space, the organization had made a deliberate effort from the beginning to make an impact on the larger Asian American community.

In 1981, after the bylaws were written, an election was held and Yamamoto became the president of A/PLG. That year, he also ascended to the presidency of the San Fernando chapter of Japanese American Citizens League (JACL). It was not long before he saw an opportunity brewing. "I said I wanted to do a lesbian and gay coming out to the chapter. They said, 'Gee, okay,'" he says with a mischievous grin. For that evening, Yamamoto invited the "usual suspects": June Lagmay, Roy Kawasaki and Dean Goishi. During dinner before the meeting, he had the three of them dispersed among the JACL members, who had no idea that they were sitting next to the gay panelists.

"Before we started," he says, "I told them that they were exposed to some gay people and hopefully, I joked, they wouldn't catch any germs. And of course, during the panel, they asked the very kinds of questions that had been addressed by gays and lesbians for a long time, but just not in our community. Like: what made you gay? Was it in the genes? Were you raped by your uncle? I mean, who cares? But we had to work from there."

That was just the beginning. In its early years, A/PLG members reached out to other Asian American organizations and churches. The dialogue was not always easy. Sometimes, without the benefit of a historical lens, they themselves were not sure if they were making a difference at the time. Still, they persisted. After all, what would be the alternative to doing what needs to be done?

History is their best evidence yet. As Terry Gock, one of the leaders in A/PLG in its beginning, suggests, "It's not like you could do it with just one presentation or two, but our presence could not be affect the agenda of many a group."

JACL is a perfect example. It is one of the earliest Asian American organizations to officially endorse gay and lesbian marriages. During the 1994 JACL Convention in San

Lake City, Tak talked to other members from across the country. "There was a tendency of some members to say that the resolution to support gay marriages was going to divide the organization," he remembers. "I heard them say, 'We'll take you but you got to deny your gayness.' Give me a break! We'd gone that route before. Why should we continue doing that?" With education and lobbying, the resolution passed by a narrow margin (see article on pg. 4).

The victory was not too surprising to many who had done this work for years. Terry Gock says, "How did that happen? From the last fifteen, twenty years, starting with A/PLG getting involved with JACL. When Tak was the president of the San Fernando Valley chapter, he got us into JACL to talk about gay Asian issues and got the chapter to support many, many efforts that went on from there. It's all these connections and contacts that A/PLG made!"

Today, the Asian Pacific Islander community in Los Angeles enjoys a plethora of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender organizations. This did not happen naturally or easily. We owe this diversity to the early efforts of pioneers like Tak, June, Dean and Terry. Recovering their stories has

been invigorating for me. If they were courageous enough to push the sexuality envelope in an era when there was really no support or community, then our generation, which is blessed with a lot more resources and history, has no excuse to remain complacent about the prejudice and discrimination that still surrounds us today. *

Eric C. Wat is the author of *The Making of a Gay Asian Community: An Oral History of Pre-AIDS Los Angeles*. He was born and grew up in Hong Kong. He has taught Asian American studies at California State University Northridge and University of California Los Angeles and was a recipient of the 2000-2001 Sundance Arts Writing Fellowship. His writing has appeared in various literary and academic journals and anthologies. He lives in Los Angeles.

In *The Making of a Gay Asian Community: An Oral History of Pre-AIDS Los Angeles*, gay Asian Americans talk frankly about their struggle for self-determination and independence. For the first time, in their own words, pioneers in the Los Angeles movement discuss the gay scene in Southern California and the development of a distinctly Asian American identity. By documenting the founding of A/PLG, Wat portrays the ways gay Asians fashioned a coherent community based on both their race and sexuality. Order the book online, \$24.95, at www.rowmanlittlefield.com or call (800) 462-6420.

THE GOOD FIGHT

by Daniel C. Tsang

Kiyoshi Kuromiya was a gay liberation pioneer and leading AIDS activist who founded Critical Path AIDS Project in Philadelphia. A Japanese American born in the Heart Mountain "Relocation" Camp during World War II, he once told me that he grew up as a homosexual youngster during the McCarthy period in Los Angeles, easily seducing older men.

As an early activist in the civil rights movement, he participated in restaurant sit-ins on Route 40 in Maryland at establishments that refused to serve blacks. He met Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1963, worked with him in Selma and Montgomery, Alabama, and became a family friend; he cared for the King children, Martin and Dexter, at the King home after their father was assassinated in 1968.

In 1965, he was hospitalized with head injuries suffered at the hands of the Montgomery sheriff while leading a group of black high school students on a voter registration drive at the state capitol. During the Vietnam War, he participated in anti-war protests, becoming one of 12,000 arrestees in 1972 in

Washington, DC during an attempted shut-down of the national capitol.

Kuromiya was active in homosexual causes before Stonewall (the 1969 raid of a gay bar that galvanized the gay rights movement). In 1965 he was one of a dozen demonstrators for homosexual rights at Independence Hall in Philadelphia, where he had moved from California. And in 1970 he spoke on gay rights before the Black Panther Party's Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia.

In an interview for Arthur Dong's documentary "Outrage 69," which aired on PBS in 1995, Kiyoshi noted the prevalent racism of the time, saying he was often kicked out of Gay Activist Alliance meetings in New York when he spoke out against racism. As a radical, he also noted that the earlier activists—called "homophiles"—were "well-dressed middle-aged" (maybe he meant middle-class) folks with whom he had little in common, not someone he would have wanted to "party with."

Kuromiya also worked for a long time with Buckminster Fuller, collaborat-

ing with Fuller on the book *Critical Path* (1980) as well as other titles. He served on National Institutes of Health panel on alternative therapies and was an advocate of the medical use of marijuana, operating a free cannabis club and using it himself for "complementary therapy". In 1997 he became lead plaintiff in a federal case (Kuromiya et al v. USA) seeking to legalize medical marijuana. He argued: "Without marijuana, I will waste away and perish. If I use marijuana for my health, I am violating federal criminal laws and I risk certain death in prison."

Kuromiya passed away May 10, 2000 in Philadelphia from complications from AIDS. His inspiration and dedication affected the lives of countless individuals. Critical Path continues to carry on his legacy, especially the right to disseminate sexually explicit information on the Internet through Critical Path's web-site (<http://www.critpath.org/>).

Dan Tsang, a librarian at University of California Irvine, hosts "Subversity," a weekly interview program on 88.9 FM, kuci.org.