

Moving Forward Through the Lives of Today's

Youth: Volunteers at Work

by Mas Yamasaki

It was almost eighteen years ago that my daughter, Lauren, was studying *The Diary of Anne Frank* at Thornton Jr. High School in Fremont, when the subject of concentration camps was discussed by the class. My daughter happened to mention that there were concentration camps in the United States and that her father was in one of them.

It was then that the teacher asked my daughter if her father wouldn't mind talking to the class about his experiences in camp. When my daughter asked me whether I would speak to her class about my camp experience, I first thought that I would rather not; however, I realized that the students were interested and wanted to know about an event that happened in our own backyard. I realized that I had to do it. It was from that day that I started giving talks to the various schools on the subject of the internment of Japanese and American Japanese during World War II.

I have made presentations to mostly to junior classes in high schools because they are studying U.S. History and World War II. I have also made presentations to universities, community colleges, high schools, junior high schools, and elementary schools. I must admit it is a challenge to speak to students from many different levels because I have to gear myself to different levels of understanding. I speak mostly to the junior classes and feel most comfortable and at ease speaking to students at that level. I let the students ask me questions, and it helps me gather ideas on what topics I should speak about the next time I make my presentation. The juniors want to know about the schools, dating, sports, and what I did to pass the time, since we did not have television and movies were shown only about once a month.

They also wanted to know what types of clothing we wore and how we managed to do with what little we had. When these students ask me questions about my experiences I feel that I have something to contribute by activating their inquisitive minds. One teacher said she was surprised that students in one of her remedial classes were the ones asking all, if not most of the questions. The teacher was surprised that her remedial class would take such an interest to ask so many questions that surpassed the response by the advanced class.

I have received excerpts of reports written by students in many of the classes where I have spoken. It is very gratifying to read some of their comments. One student stated that he wants to pursue his career in law so that he would see that the constitutional rights of any citizen would not be violated. One Chinese American girl said that she had been an undeclared major; however, after she heard my presentation, she decided to pursue a career working for the Asian community. I recently met her and she said that she is now working for the Asian Bone Marrow Transplant Program.

Last summer, my grand niece did a project on the Constitution and won the state contest. She was able to show her display and the National Conference at Washington D.C., where she placed third.

Last month, I heard from my niece who is an eighth-grader in Kaneohe, Hawaii, where she is doing a research paper on Fred Korematsu. At Newark Memorial High School, Mr. Paul DeWitt, Head of the Social Science Department, had done a remarkable job establishing "The Internment Program of American Japanese during World War II." He has prepared teacher's guides for all the Social Science teachers in California. He was given the "California Teacher of the Year" award and was recognized by the Japanese American Services of the East Bay.

When I see these commendable achievements by these individuals, I feel happy that I had a small part in that accomplishment.

Story telling has been the primary vehicle for remembering our histories. The Redress and Reparations movements found their spirit through public testimonials that spoke across generations and opened discussions about experiences that had been lost for years. Mas Yamasaki narrates how he has continued that tradition beyond Japanese American communities and into classrooms. A retired administrator, he has been a board member of NJAHS and currently serves on our program committee. He provides an inspirational model for those who wish to begin or continue the necessary work of sharing their experiences to youth outside Japanese American communities.