

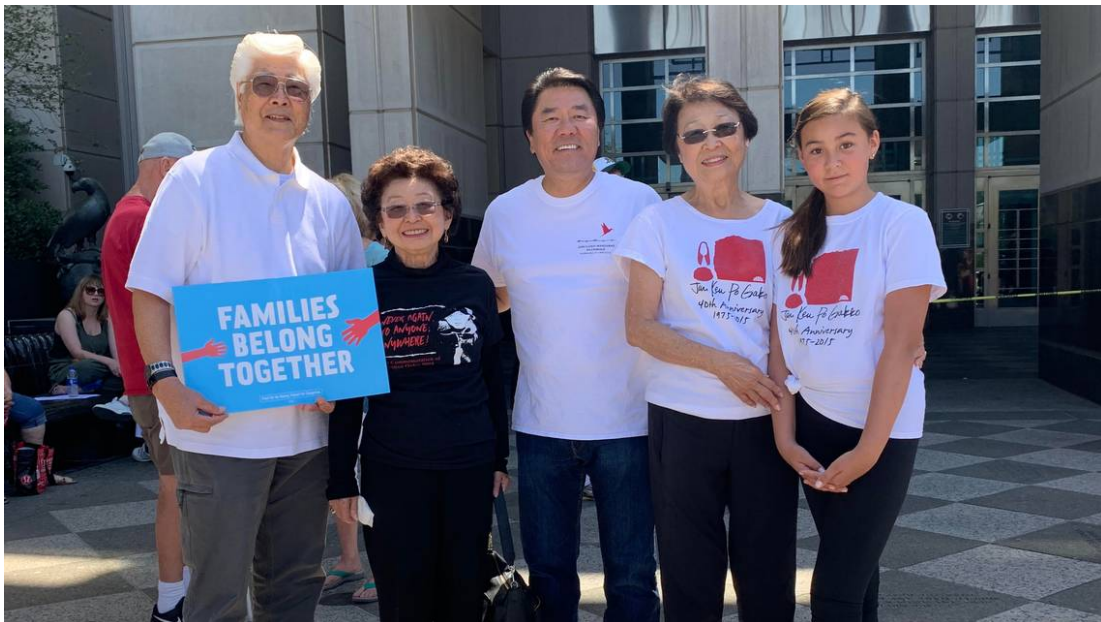


LOCAL

Japanese Americans survived internment in WWII. Now they protest migrant detentions at border

BY KYUNG MI LEE

JULY 25, 2019 05:30 AM



Hach Yasumura, Marielle Tsukamoto, Josh Kaizuka, Christine Umeda and Jaselle Umeda pose at a July 2 immigration protest outside the Robert T. Matsui federal courthouse in Sacramento. *CHRISTINE UMEDA*

Christine Umeda, 81, has been plagued by the same recurring nightmare for most of her adult life.

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For years she struggled to identify the cause of it, to piece together decades-old memories she seemed to have erased from her mind. Umeda, a second-generation Japanese American, eventually realized the dream was a childhood memory of incarceration during World War II.

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Now, as an active member of the Florin Japanese American Citizens League, she is part of a growing cohort of Japanese Americans around the country protesting the detention of immigrant children at the southern border.

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Tsuru for Solidarity, as the ad hoc group is called, began with a protest at the South Texas Family Residential Center in March. Since then, they have organized twice at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, in anticipation of a federal plan to house 1,400 migrant children in the same installation that held 700 Japanese immigrants in 1942. In their most recent trip, they joined a national coalition of activist organizations, with representation from Native American tribes, Black Lives Matter Oklahoma, and the local American Civil Liberties Union, [according to The Oklahoman](#).

Migrant detention and refugee resettlement malpractices evoke a familiar past for the Japanese

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survivors and descendants to the front lines of the battle against mass incarceration and deportation of undocumented immigrants.

CRANE OF PEACE

Tsuru, the Japanese word for crane, represents peace and nonviolence, as internationally memorialized by the story of Sadako Sasaki, a 12-year-old victim of the American atomic bomb in Hiroshima. Sasaki folded 1,000 paper cranes as a symbol of hope before her death.

When the group first issued a call for 10,000 origami cranes to be hung in March at the South Texas detention center, supporters from around the world sent 30,000 cranes, including 4,000 from the inmates of San Quentin State Prison.

Over 60 Japanese Americans, many of them incarcerated during World War II, [joined a local Texas nonprofit](#) in solidarity with the detainees. Colorful origami cranes draped the fence surrounding the facility and a taiko ensemble drummed a message of hope to the mostly women and children imprisoned inside.

Just 40 miles away from the Dilley, Texas, detention center is the Crystal City Family Internment Camp, where co-organizer and psychotherapist Satsuki Ina, 75, reunited with her father at the end of the war. He was separated from his family and charged with sedition for his protest of the government's effort to segregate the Japanese Americans through a loyalty questionnaire.

Years after their release, she found an entry in her mother's diary that highlighted the despair during her incarceration:

"I wonder if today is the day," her mother wrote, "when they're going to line us up and shoot us."

FEELING ECHOES FROM THE PAST

Walking around Crystal City, seeing the remnants of buildings that once imprisoned her, Ina recalled a chilling resonance to "all the similar circumstances of indefinite detention and family separation."

According to the Texas Historical Commission, the Crystal City Family Internment Camp held 4,751 Department of Justice prisoners from 1942 to 1945, over two-thirds of whom were of Japanese ancestry.

Ina knew the kind of conditions the children in Dilley could be subject to. At the request of an American Civil Liberties Union lawyer who sought her expertise, she joined a local religious organization in a covert arrangement to enter the Karnes County Residential Center in 2015, one of the three Immigration and Customs Enforcement family detention centers, to interview detainees.

The mothers and children she met lived in fear of deportation, suffering from the trauma of their lives at home, their journey to the border and their incarceration upon reaching the United States. One of the children struggled to fall asleep, frightened by frequent night terrors of a hound baring its teeth into her face. She remembered the border patrol canine violently snapping at her when they surrendered for asylum, her mother explained to Ina. Another child refused to participate in school, sobbing whenever her peers would go missing from class. When asked by Ina, "What happens when somebody is missing from the classroom?" She answered, "They're sent back home and murdered."



The U.S. Border Patrol released video of a brief tour they gave reporters inside a detention facility in McAllen, Texas, where it holds families arrested at the southern U.S. border. The video shows adult and children housed in cages. BY US CUSTOMS AND BORDER PROTECTION OFFICE VIA STORYFUL

“The degradation of incarceration,” Ina said, was “being charged with threat of national security when there was never any evidence or proof.”

In her time as a psychologist specializing in community trauma, she interviewed many Japanese American survivors of incarceration who suppressed their memories of camp.

Umeda, for example, was 4 years old when her family was sent to the Tule Lake Segregation Center in Northern California. She remembers little about her own time in detention. Her remaining recollections are broken fragments of childhood confusion and distress.

“It appears that I have blocked everything [from my memory] regarding Tule Lake. ... I remember my brother crying when going to the bathroom,” she said. “When [my older sisters] took me to preschool, I cried and wouldn’t let them leave.”

She sat in on a community workshop for survivors of Japanese American prison camps led by Ina, listening to other survivors share vivid memories of their childhood. She found herself asking, “How come I don’t remember anything that happened to me?”

After digging through archival government records and consulting her older sisters, she learned that she contracted pneumonia two weeks upon arriving at the Arboga Assembly Center in Marysville and was transported, alone, to a nearby medical facility. She said her older sisters remember “the doors slamming on that panel truck” as she screamed.

“My husband always jokes that I never close anything – drawers half open and medicine cabinet doors not closed,” she said. “I told him, ‘Maybe you’re right.’”

FAMILY DETENTIONS HIT HOME

Umeda took part in the Crystal City pilgrimage and Dilley protest through her ongoing activism with the Florin Japanese American Citizens League. Since its founding in 1935, the Florin chapter has actively preserved Japanese cultural heritage and promoted social justice.

Joshua Kaizuka, the co-president of the Florin JACL, sees opposition to immigrant detention as “a responsibility based on the history and injustice of what’s happened to” the Japanese American community

In 1980, the congressional Commission on wartime relocation and internment of civilians found that “race prejudice, war hysteria and a failure of political leadership” resulted in the incarceration of Japanese Americans. Kaizuka compared the Trump administration’s fear-mongering to war hysteria against the Japanese during World War II.

“The racism itself is identical,” he said.

He cited an incident in Oklahoma on June 22, when a military police officer interrupted a Tsuru for Solidarity protest of six former incarcerated. Ina was present, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with fellow survivors, holding a black-and-white photograph of herself as a child in Tule Lake. As the elders shared a microphone and bore witness to the eerie familiarity of migrant detention, an Army officer tried to push the protest off military property.

“You need to move now!” he shouted. “What don’t you people understand? It’s English. Get out!”

The lieutenant colonel involved in the incident has since been suspended for his actions, according to the Army Times.

“It is so familiar to hear the same rhetoric justifying the incarceration of people seeking refuge in the United States,” Ina said. “People of color being told they are a threat to national security, that they’re criminals. Those are the same kinds of accusations that were put out about Japanese Americans.”

For Japanese Americans whose parents and family spoke out during the war, the act of protest carries a “double consciousness,” said Ina. Standing out on the front lines and risking arrest means confronting a painful history.

“There’s a very powerful feeling for the Japanese American community that has suffered intergenerational trauma to find their voice and speak up on behalf of others,” she said. “It’s a convergence of healing and empowerment.”

Kaizuka invoked a famous Japanese phrase associated with World War II incarceration: “shikata ga nai” meaning, “it can’t be helped.”

“Shikata ga nai?” he asked. “Not today.”

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