



Let It **NOT** Happen Again

EIGHT DECADES
AFTER THE
**JAPANESE
AMERICAN
EXCLUSION**

BY ALLISON
SCHUCHMAN

PHOTOS BY
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Lilly Kitamoto Kodama couldn't sleep the night of March 29, 1942. She was too excited.

Her mother, Shigeko, had told her that the next day they were going to Seattle. It would be like a vacation.

But behind the brave face she wore for her children, Shigeko was planning to leave their Bainbridge Island farm for a concentration camp. The young mother was complying with President Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066 which, following the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, authorized the creation of exclusion zones along the West Coast, allowing the forcible removal of people of Japanese descent, regardless of citizenship or length of residence. Bainbridge was the first designated zone.

Shigeko bore the tragic exodus alone that day because her husband Frank had been arrested and jailed in a sweeping FBI island raid on February 4, 1942. "Within hours after Pearl Harbor, they came to our island," explained former Bainbridge Island Japanese American Community president and newly elected Bainbridge Island city council member, Clarence Moriwaki. "And without search warrants, charges nor trials, arrested 34 of our elders. They went to all 50 homes simultaneously in coordination with all the Kitsap County Sheriffs and Washington State Patrol. That's how quickly fear and hate, prejudice and bigotry can happen. It can happen on a dime."

Shigeko left home as ordered on March 30, 1942, reporting to the Eagledale Ferry with her four children in tow. Lilly was the oldest at age 7. The youngest was just 9 months. "At the dock I saw all my cousins and aunties because we all



lived on the island," Kodama said. She also saw soldiers with guns. "People could only take what they could carry, usually one suitcase. People ask what I think was in my mother's suitcase. Naturally, it was diapers."

Alongside 271 other people from the island, Shigeko and her children departed Bainbridge for Seattle and were then sent to the concentration camp in Manzanar, California.

March 30, 2022 marks the 80th anniversary of that fateful day.

Kodama supposes that one of the reasons Bainbridge was the first exclusion zone was that its Japanese population was small enough to be imprisoned at Manzanar, which had previously been run by the United States Army. "I always tell people, there was an advantage to being the first," she said. "Barracks were not the best place to live, but it was a lot better than temporary housing that other communities were



sent to, for instance at fairgrounds where their rooms were makeshift animal stalls."

Kodama recalls her mother's dignity despite the rigors of caring for her family in the camp. "I do not remember my mom and my aunts grousing and complaining about the terrible conditions. I think about myself as a young mother with toddlers and I would have coffee with my friends. We would complain about our toddlers or about our husbands who never help. I marvel that they didn't do that. I think they were protecting us and trying their darndest to make things as normal as possible. I often point that out to children. No matter how bad the conditions are, as long as Mama's with you, everything is okay."

Kodama said another advantage of being first was that they got a lot of press coverage. "Bainbridge Island was totally different from

other communities on the West Coast because the Woodwards, who were the owners of the Bainbridge Review, consistently editorialized what was happening to our community."

At the time of the exclusion, high school senior Paul Ohtaki, a Japanese American, was working for the newspaper, sweeping up and acting as a gofer for Walt and Milly Woodward after school. As his removal loomed, the Woodwards proposed that Ohtaki work as a reporter from Manzanar, an arrangement that ultimately helped preserve the connection between those excluded and the islanders back home. "He would write things to the Review about what was happening to us in the camps," Kodama said. "Telling about marriages and births and deaths. Then, in turn,

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the Review was sent to the camps so the people in the camp knew what's happening on Bainbridge. In other communities, once the Japanese were gone, they were gone."

Moriwaki concurs that the Woodwards' legacy cannot be overemphasized. "When Pearl Harbor happened, Walt wrote a careful editorial saying let's not rush to mob rule ... these are friends and neighbors. But when Roosevelt signed order 9066, his editorials were blistering," Moriwaki explained that although in the beginning the Review was not alone in its opposition to the exclusion, it maintained that stance throughout the war while other news outlets jumped on the bandwagon of Japanese racism. "[Walt] Woodward was strong.





He lost subscribers, he lost advertisers. But through his editorial leadership, he set the tone of what the community was and what it stood for."

"Another remarkable thing is when the war ended, we were able to return to our homes," said Kodama. After her father's arrest but before the family's exclusion, Frank Kitamoto wrote to his wife, suggesting that she ask the two Filipino men who had worked on the farm for years, cousins Felix Narte and Eulalio Aquino, if they would move into the house and care for it while the Kitamotos were gone. The cousins did so until the family's return in August 1945.

"They were like family to me," said Kodama. "After the war, my parents gave them not quite an acre of land, deeded it over to them. After my husband [Mits "Joe" Kodama] and I retired, we moved back to the island, and I now live in the house I was born in. Right next door is Felix Narte Jr., who lives in the

house his father had built on the farm. So, it is still family and friends living right next door to each other. I think that's a telling story."

Since neighbors throughout the island agreed to take care of the Japanese Americans' farms, and because of the widely held sentiment that the exclusion was immoral and illegal, Bainbridge holds the distinction of having had more than 150 of the 276 excluded people come back. "There's not a community on the West Coast that came close to 15 percent returning," said Moriwaki. "Some communities, like Bellingham, passed an official resolution forbidding their return. They were met with terrorism, groups of people with pitchforks and rifles coming to meet them. That's fearful intimidation. Why would you want to stay? And that was sanctioned by the government. What makes our island different is that we didn't accept the tide of racism."

Though Kodama points out that the Japanese community was not unanimously welcomed home, she believes that the island's response to their return makes Bainbridge a unique community. Despite her three-and-a-half-year absence, "I don't remember anything untoward happening to me in school. My classmates treated me as if I was just gone for a little while and came back."



Photo | Wayne Roth



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After World War II ended, Kodama explained that many in the Japanese community avoided speaking of the exclusion and imprisonment, in part because it was such a dark chapter and would reopen old wounds, but also because the community felt that it had risen above it and carried on. Others, she said, disagreed. "They'd say we should not forget that this happened, so that it should never happen again to any others. My brother was actually that person, as were his friends Junkoh Harui and Don Nakata. I think the three of them were maybe the ones who began to tell the story of what happened to us."

Kodama's brother Frank Jr. became an outspoken leader of the Japanese community. He, along with Jerry Nakata and Walt Woodward, took a traveling exhibit about the exclusion to schools, community centers and churches. This, in turn, prompted the Interfaith Council of Kitsap County to reach out to the community and float the idea for something more permanent to commemorate the exclusion.

Several smaller tributes were created and from those grew the ambitious idea for the Bainbridge Island Japanese American Exclusion Memorial. Shortly after Kodama and her husband moved back to the island, they attended a baby shower. "They were discussing raising millions of dollars for this memorial and I'm thinking there are not that many of us on the island. But it wasn't just the Japanese community, it was the entire community that got involved."

Millions of dollars were indeed raised from donations and grants to construct the memorial, which opened to the public on July 30, 2011 and is now launching its final phase of construction. Its centerpiece is a curving cedar wall that lists the names of all 276 island residents who were excluded. It was designed pro bono by American

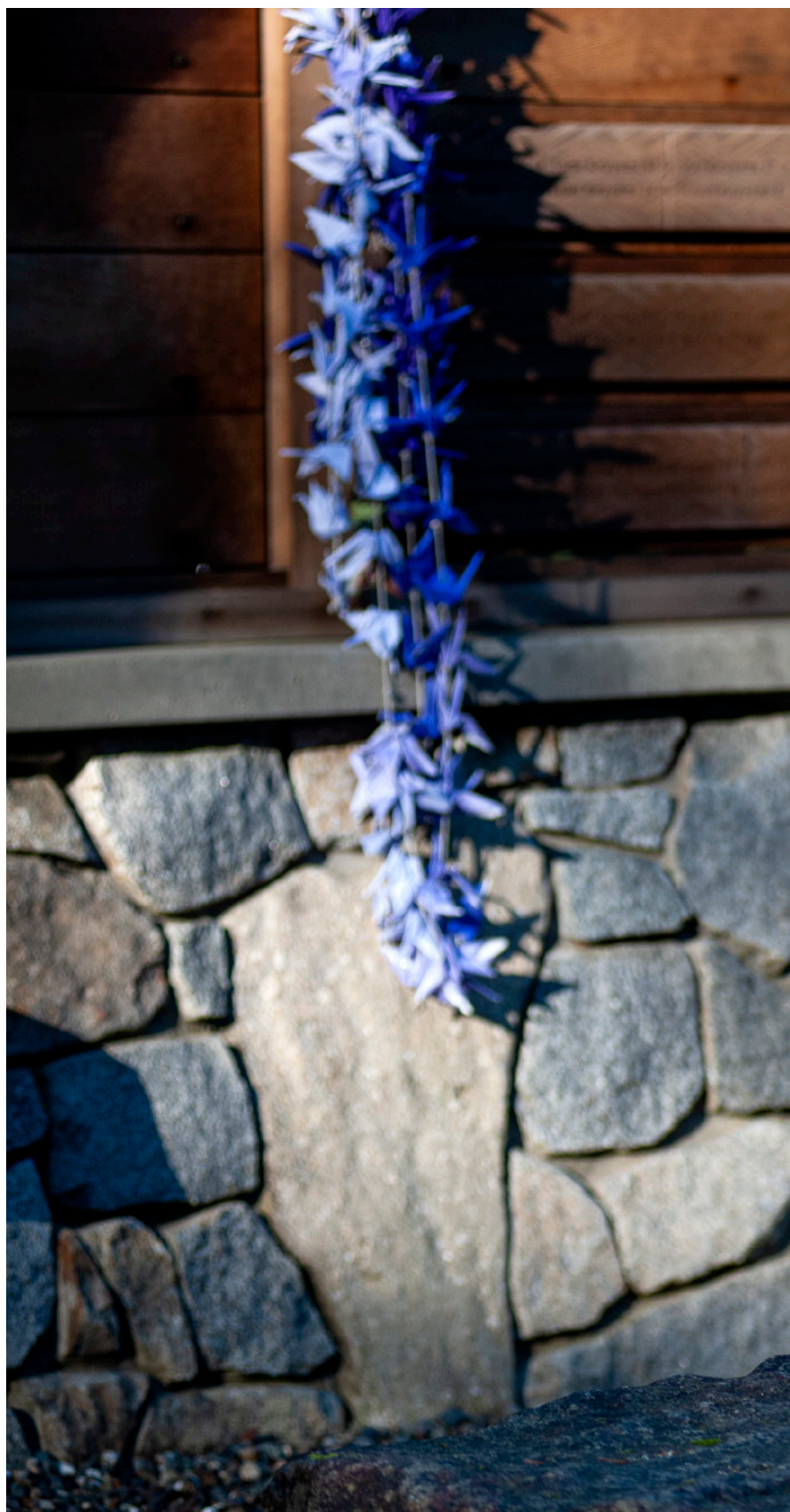


Indian architect Johnpaul Jones. Artist Steve Gardner created murals that depict scenes of residents being herded onto the ferries. The installation's motto is "Nidoto Nai Yoni," a Japanese phrase meaning, "Let it not happen again."

Bainbridge Island Japanese American Exclusion Memorial Association (BIJAEMA) president G. Val Tollefson estimates that, based on the experience of docents who run tours and on the observations of the National Park Service ranger who is on site during the summer, more than 10,000 people a year visit the site, 70 to 80 percent of whom come from outside Bainbridge and Kitsap County. "It's not just about casting memories in amber," he said, "This is not just history, it's human rights. It's relevant today."

Moriwaki explained that not everyone knows how to feel when they learn this part of American history. "A lot of people have different reactions. A lot of people feel guilt or anger, humiliation, frustration. And all those feelings are valid. What we wanted with this statement, 'Nidoto Nai Yoni,' was to be an aspirational call that when times of fear happen, remember what happened to American citizens in World War II. If you can take inspiration from how our island responded to a nationwide tidal wave of fear and racism, then our memorial had its impact. But it's more than just feeling. You must act. You have to actually act it when it does happen."

"I remember that when the project was almost completed, we had a big potluck gathering at the





American Legion Hall," said Kodama, "and I happened to sit next to a second-generation man and he said, 'You know, I was one who didn't like the idea of this memorial, but I'm sure glad they didn't pay any attention to me.'" Kodama said that it is not only the Japanese community who continues to embrace and support the memorial, pointing out that most of the people on its board are not Japanese. "I think it's pretty telling about what kind of community this is and I am so proud and happy to be part of it."



Before Frank Jr.'s death, Kodama would follow behind him while he gave tours at the memorial. "He always pointed out that it was not something built to place blame or shame or guilt, but to make sure that people realized what happened and make sure that this would not happen ever again to any other group." After he passed away, Kodama realized that someone needed to pick up where he left off. "I was one who didn't feel comfortable speaking in public, but it's become easier and now at my age I think, 'Why am I worried about that?' So, I play my senior card a lot."

THE RESPONSIBILITY TO SHARE

"People need to recognize that the Japanese American exclusion story is basically people being afraid of people because they look like the enemy," said Bainbridge Island History Museum community outreach manager **Katy Curtis**. The museum, in partnership with BIJAEMA and the Bainbridge Island Japanese American Community (BIJAC), as well as the National Park Service and Bainbridge's Parks District, helps preserve the collection of the Japanese American community and its cultural objects.

Curtis personally sees her role as a custodian for the stories surrounding the exclusion, including preserving the wisdom and work of her special friend Kazuko "Kay" Sakai, who passed away at age 100 in 2020. Sakai's family was among those excluded and, in the years following their return to island, her story became fundamental to the telling of her community's experience.

"There are 120,000 stories," said Curtis, referring to the total number of Japanese Americans who were excluded and imprisoned. "I feel like I had the honor of being friends, and so I feel, I don't know how you'd say it, but I feel whatever is the positive word for obligation. I feel like her story must be told to all generations of islanders."

On display at the museum during the commemoration surrounding the exclusion's 80th anniversary is one of the posters the military posted on March 24, 1942, instructing Japanese islanders to report to the Eagledale Ferry on March 30. Curtis said that the poster cannot be indefinitely displayed in the exhibit as it will become further degraded by the light. However, people attending the commemoration can see it.

Johanna Vander Stoep, a retired educator and the founding principal of Sonoji Sakai Intermediate School, is proud of the school's curriculum and its role in the preservation of the history of the exclusion. "Until the '80s, that whole history was not talked about a whole lot and certainly would not have defined Bainbridge Island in the way that it puts us on the map. It's that story that we feel most responsible to share."



She said that the naming of the school embraced that duty to the community. "Since the year that the school was being planned, it has been important. The school is 21 years old and it continues to be so." Vander Stoep points to the public art that is part of the school, including a photo display of a group of friends—The 7-Ups—who were in seventh grade when they were incarcerated. "They tell the story of the friendship that they forged in camp and that continued through the rest of their lives."

Vander Stoep said that most important day of the year at the school is called "Leaving our Island Day," during which sixth graders learn about the exclusion firsthand from survivors. As time goes by however, those opportunities are waning, so the school continues to build its library of recorded interviews, as well as reaching out to survivors from other communities and inviting them to participate.

"Getting to meet survivors, students describe that as life-changing," she said. "You hear about children being incarcerated in the desert, but when you meet Lily Kodama and see what kind of wonderful, law-abiding human being she is, it just becomes so real. Students' lives are changed in terms of understanding injustice. And hearing how they kept community while they were away, learning lessons of resilience and patience and perseverance."