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Japanese-Americans Honored for WWII Role Memorial Pays Tribute to Internees to Troops

Jennifer Bayot Globe
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WASHINGTON - Grayce Uyehara spent most of an April day in 1942 puzzling over a federal notice that told Japanese-American families in her neighborhood to go to the county fairgrounds.

But first, according to the poster tacked to a telephone pole outside their home in Stockton, Calif., they had to spend the next four weeks selling their belongings.

"Then we went to the county fairgrounds. We remembered them as a fun place, with cotton candy and popcorn," Uyehara said. "But we got there and they'd set up these barracks."

Uyehara, her six siblings, and her parents were promptly routed to an internment camp in Arkansas swampland, where patrolling soldiers and barbed wire surrounded them.

It was World War II, and throughout the West Coast more than 120,000 Japanese-Americans - most of them US citizens - were being uprooted and forced into camps for fear they would leak secrets to Japan. Families, many of whom lost everything they owned, spent as many as four years in the camps.

Yesterday, nearly 60 years later, a memorial to the internees as well as to the more than 30,000 Japanese-Americans who served during World War II opened here. A ring of engraved stone slabs, the National Japanese-American Memorial to Patriotism will everyday see thousands of people - everyone who walks through the busy grounds between the Capitol and Union Station.

"It is more than a message of tragedy. . . . It is ultimately a message of national redemption," Secretary of Transportation Norman Y. Mineta said in a speech during yesterday's ribbon-cutting ceremony. About 300 veterans, former internees, and their families traveled here - many from California - for the opening.

Designed by Davis Buckley, who worked five years without compensation, the memorial features a curve of granite wedges that lead into a broken circle of taller tablets.

There, perched on a marble column, two bronze cranes ensnared in barbed wire struggle to free themselves. Sculptor Nina Akamu based the work on her family's experience as internees.

The memorial's panels are etched with quotes that reflect on and illuminate a dark part of America's past.

"The memorial is a gift to all Americans, who probably, for the most part, do not know much about that chapter in American history," said Cherry Y. Tsutsumida, an internee as a child and executive director of the National Japanese-American Memorial Foundation.

The foundation raised \$13 million from more than 20,000 donors throughout the United States and Japan. The first \$10 million paid for the memorial's construction, while the remaining \$3 million is earmarked for educational programs.

Aside from obtaining the funds, the most challenging part of the project was deciding what words would be engraved in the granite, Tsutsumida said.

The most controversy surrounded a quote by Mike M. Masaoka, a staff sergeant of the 442d Regimental Combat Team. It reads: "I am proud that I am an American of Japanese ancestry. I believe in this nation's institutions, ideals and traditions; I glory in her heritage; I boast of her history; I trust in her future."

Though eventually approved, the quote struck some younger Japanese-Americans as excessively and naively patriotic and they thought it shouldn't be included because Masaoka agreed with the government that put his people in internment camps.

Japanese-American World War II veterans yesterday said they understand why their patriotism can be hard to fathom. "You were fighting to uphold the Constitution yet [would] find your parents and siblings behind barbed wire," said Grant Hirabayashi, 81.

But Hirabayashi voiced sentiments similar to those of a fellow veteran, Senator Daniel K. Inouye, a Hawaii Democrat. Inouye said the injustices made them want to prove their allegiance.

He recounted a battle in France to rescue a lost American battalion. "This was the battle to test our loyalty, to test our patriotism, our love of country."

Inouye, also a member of the highly decorated 442d Regimental Combat Team, lost his right arm during the war.

The senator was instrumental in the passage of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which formally apologized to Japanese-Americans and ordered minor reparations.

The memorial, Inouye and others say, adds to that step.

"In our hearts we believed our fellow Americans would some day recognize the internment for the injustice that it was," said Mineta, a second-generation Japanese-American, or Nisei.

The memorial furthermore cautions against that injustice.

Pointing to the inscribed names of the 10 internment camps, Uyehara said: "We don't want this to be repeated for any other people. If you don't remind people, then they're liable to repeat themselves."

Now 81, Uyehara drove here from Medford, N.J., to officially represent the camp internees by ringing a long cylindrical bell that is part of the memorial.

After a teenage ensemble's performance on Japanese taiko drums, Uyehara leveraged herself to release a peal that accompanied the cutting of the ribbon on the other side of the monument.

Looking to the hundreds who had come for the ceremony, Uyehara said: "We've come a long ways."