

Worland native, civil liberties activist, to receive high Japanese honor

- By MARTIN KIDSTON Gazette Wyoming Bureau
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WORLAND, Wyo. — It was Valentine's Day in 1988 when Grant Ujifusa sat down with President Ronald Reagan's chief of staff to find out where the administration stood on a bill that promised to change the course of American history.

By 11 a.m., Ujifusa had his answer. The Civil Liberties Act was set to become law that August, giving redress to thousands of Japanese-Americans once held at U.S. internment camps during World War II.

"He (Chief of Staff Ken Duberstein) said the president was going to sign the bill," Ujifusa said, speaking from his home Tuesday in New York. "I was the first person outside the inner circle of the White House to know. I floated back up Connecticut Avenue that morning."

This week in New York, Ujifusa will be honored by the Japanese government with an Order of the Rising Sun for his work in helping pass the Civil Liberties Act, and his efforts to preserve and promote the history and culture of Japanese-Americans.

A native of Worland, Wyo., and the quarterback of the 1959 state championship Worland Warriors football team, Ujifusa has come a long way from the days he spent kicking around his grandfather's Wyoming beet farm.

But it was down on the farm where Ujifusa saw his future. He counts among his earliest memories the 1944 release of a dozen young Japanese Americans from the Heart Mountain Relocation Camp, located across the Bighorn Basin in Powell, Wyo.

"My grandfather brought around 15 young Japanese American men home to the farm and gave them work topping sugar beets," Ujifusa said. "Among my very earliest memories were these people coming down from Heart Mountain."

Among them was a man named Joe Furuta, who Ujifusa came to see as a surrogate uncle. He was, Ujifusa maintains, one of the first people outside his immediate family he was ever close to.

His grandfather, who helped build the railroad through the rugged Wind River Canyon, also was a hard and loyal worker who emigrated from Okayama, Japan. His mother, Mary Ujifusa, believed strongly in civic involvement.

For Ujifusa, his future path was becoming clear.

"My mother, who was very active in Worland, believed you had to be involved civically in the community," Ujifusa said. "My involvement in Japanese redress efforts were based on how my mother felt about life. This was an attempt to reverse, legislatively, a breakdown of our Constitution."

Ujifusa was more than just a football star with lofty visions. He was admitted to Harvard University and graduated with honors in 1965. By the early 1970s, he had landed at Random House, where he served as founding editor and co-author of the "Almanac of American Politics."

Ujifusa was on a collision course with destiny. His place in time and his experience as a boy growing up in Wyoming promised a showdown over the constitutional shunning of 110,000 Americans of Japanese ancestry.

"There were two important Japanese-American elders — the Martin Luther Kings of the Japanese-American community — who asked me to help because I had access to the Republican side and the Reagan White House," Ujifusa said. "I took over the lobbying effort in 1984 with the Japanese American Citizens League."

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Ujifusa was reluctant at first, but history now tells a different story. In his speech to the consulate general of Japan in New York on Thursday, Ujifusa will recall the changes that took place in American politics in the years leading up to Reagan's signing of the Civil Liberties Act.

To tell the story, Ujifusa jumps back to August 1944 when a young U.S. soldier named Kazuo Masuda was killed in action in Italy. When his family went to bury him in Fountain Valley, Calif., the city leaders told them "we don't bury Japs in our cemetery."

As Ujifusa tells it, Gen. Joe Stilwell, who commanded "Merrill's Marauders" in the China-India Theater during WWII, got involved in the controversy. Fountain Valley relented and permitted Masuda's burial.

A young movie star and Army captain named Ronald Reagan was invited to speak at the event.

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"The blood that has soaked in the sand is all one color," Ujifusa quotes Reagan as saying at the service. "America stands unique in the world, the only country not founded on race, but on a way — an ideal."

Reagan would have to be reminded of that speech years later if the Civil Liberties Act was going to pass. In the mid-1980s, the Republican president stood as a public opponent to redress, assuming that Japanese-Americans were sent to internment camps for protective custody.

Allied with strong supporters of redress, Ujifusa was able to bend Reagan's ear. A letter from Masuda's sister, June, didn't hurt. Months later, he learned of Reagan's intent to sign the redress bill that February day in 1988.

"The fundamental definition of politics is that it's a group effort," Ujifusa said. "I feel in some ways privileged to receive this award, but at the same time, it was a huge team effort by thousands of people who were completely devoted to the cause."

Ujifusa said he's humbled by the Order of the Rising Sun and the recognition bestowed upon him by the Japanese government.

Despite his place and time in history and his work to mend a breakdown in the U.S. Constitution, he'd still rather talk about his Wyoming beet farm and his 1959 state football championship.

"My grandfather helped build a railroad through Worland and the Wind River Canyon, and my grandmother lived in a boxcar south of Manderson," he said. "My grandma and grandpa worked hard and wanted to make a good life for me.

"I'm loyal to what they have done and what my parents did. I'm happiest when I'm home in Wyoming."

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