

Denny Yasuhara, Redress Champion

No one will be surprised to learn that there was an inside and an outside battle to secure redress, one inside JACL and another outside in Washington. The indispensable leader inside was Denny Yasuhara of Spokane. Denny carried Harry Kajihara of Oxnard to a win over the tall, physically striking Rose Ochi of LA in the race for JACL National President at the July, 1986, Chicago Convention.

Ochi was the candidate of Japan Trade Faction on the JACL Board. With PSW's Ochi herself on the Board and part of the Faction, the group had 6, sometimes 7, backers among the 16 members of JACL's governing body. The Redress Faction had 10, sometimes 9, backers, depending on how a particular motion speaking to the dispute, might be framed. The Japan Traders knew that the by-laws required 8 votes on the board to carry the day. A tie would give National President, Frank Sato, a Japan Trader, the right to vote to break the deadlock.

At series of crucial board meetings in 1984, 1985, and 1986, Denny, the Redress Faction's champion on the National Board, kept the number at seven or fewer.

Denny knew that using National JACL to lobby on behalf of the Japanese government had virtually no support among JACL rank and file members.

Even so, on the second day of the July 1986 JACL National Convention, held in Chicago, Ochi was estimated to have a 10 to 15 vote lead among the 121 chapter delegates. She was so physically striking that Norm Mineta was led to say that image projected by Ms. Ochi was exactly the image Japanese Americans should present to the American public.

But the problem with Mineta's opinion was that the not as physically striking Harry Kajihara was the Redress Faction's candidate for JACL National President, while Rose Ochi was the candidate of the LDP, the party of Japan's big corporate interests, for the same office. In fact, her candidacy was put into play by the Japanese Consul General in Los Angeles.

John Tateishi, a staffer relieved of his JAACL redress duties in the spring of 1986, came to the Chicago Convention to argue that JAACL should not become a single-issue organization, that it should instead have at least two priority issues, one of which was lobby the interests of the Japanese at all levels of government in the United States, and for that matter, to push their interests with anybody who would listen.

Some months earlier both Ochi and Tateishi were beneficiaries of gold-plated trips to Japan, where they were received as if they were major American dignitaries. Ms. Ochi's trip received front page coverage in the *Los Angeles Times*. And more trips were to come, and the trips looked to be only the beginning.

The idea to use Japanese Americans for Japanese purposes was the hare-brained scheme of Wataru Hiraizumi, a Minister Without Portfolio in the Nakasone cabinet, who believed the Japanese Americans could back Japan with the same clout that American Jews backed Israel. He was totally misinformed. But happily the junkets were soon enough stopped by Nakasone himself after a JAACL lobbyist got it to him that the trips endangered Japanese American redress.

But that was to come three months later. Back at the Chicago Convention, Denny relentlessly twisted arms behind the scenes and produced a Harry Kajihara win by 3 chapter votes out of 121 cast on the fifth day of the proceedings. The result kept JAACL committed solely to redress and proscribed lobbying for the Japanese government.

Proscribed because a single story in a major newspaper would have destroyed Japanese American redress: if you're in bed with these people now, what were you up to in 1942? Then it was about attacking Pearl Harbor and sinking the *Arizona*. Now it's about decimating Detroit and buying up Pebble Beach. Rich Japanese people asking for money from the beleaguered American taxpayer? Forget it.

In my judgement, two votes in Chicago the other way would have meant the end of Japanese

American redress.

But what was thinking of the Japan Trade Faction, which had the determined support staffers Ron Wakabayashi and John Tateishi? Both the Faction and the staffers thought redress was a hopeless enterprise what with the bill having been forever bottled up by a conservative Democratic subcommittee chairman in the House and an equally conservative Republican committee chairman in the Senate. Then there was conservative President Ronald Reagan, re-elected in a 49-state landslide in 1984, who had announced public opposition to HR 442.

The Faction and the staffers felt that JACLers wanting to push redress were the politically naive teachers and social workers in the membership ranks. But the Japan Traders were simply wrong. Why? Because we owed it to the internees, morally obligated in fact, to give redress our absolute best effort, bad though the prospects for success seemed to be.

And our best effort needed National JACL and Grayce Uyehara to engage the undivided commitment of the 121 local chapters and 22,000 JACL chapter members found in congressional districts across the country. Why? Because only people living inside particular congressional district can vote for or against their House member in the next election. And for that reason, she will listen carefully to what her constituents have to say – to voters committed to an issue like ours, willing to come to lobby her face-to-face in her district office or even make the trip to Washington to make the same case for redress.

Nobody outside the House member's district really matters, unless he is a big donor or a member of the national media.

A constituent lobbying his own Congressman lay at the heart of JACL's effort to put together at least 218 votes on the House floor for HR 442. And Denny's heroic work at one of the most important Conventions in JACL history made it possible for us to put a Politics 101 dictum – *that all politics are local* – at the center of our lobbying strategy to win House

passage.

The record shows that in New Jersey, an unlikely locale for Japanese Americans, 13 out of the 15 members of the state delegation voted “yea” on redress, thanks to the leadership of Tom Kometani. Only Cherry Kinoshita’s Washington state produced better numbers, 10 out of 10. Results out of California were nowhere close to either state.

Among many others who helped to produce “yea” votes in unlikely locales were Gene Doi in Atlanta, Georgia – Republican Congressman Pat Swindall -- and Ruth Hashimoto in Albuquerque, New Mexico – Republican Senator Pete Domenici.

Denny Yasuhara, a middle school teacher, was barely 5’3” tall, really smart, and absolutely fearless. And it didn’t hurt that he was a close personal and political friend of House Speaker Tom Foley, chief sponsor of HR 442. Both called Spokane, Washington, home. Denny died in 2002.

Most Japanese Americans don't know much about the world-class nitty-gritty it took to make redress a reality. Over time, more will as scholars and students look into the work of people like Denny Yasuhara.

But I will say it now: No redress without Denny. Nothing, nada.

Grant Ujifusa,

JACL Redress Strategy Chair, 1982-1994

Chappaqua, New York