

JACL 2018 Convention Speech

July 18, 2018

Grant Ujifusa

Thank you, David Inoue, for inviting me to join the panel today. Let me say that I am so happy to be back among members of JACL, an organization that was so much part of my life during the most important years of my life.

Let me begin by asking those here at the Convention in Philadelphia to remember always a JACLER from Philadelphia, Grayce Uyehara, who was the heart and soul and the grit and the muscle of Japanese American redress. Also remember always the great and brilliant Cherry Kinoshita of Seattle. Nothing ever escaped Cherry's awareness of where redress was and what had to be done next. You should also remember Peggy Liggett and May Takahashi, both of Fresno and both who never tired of the work of redress.

I will say to you: No redress without these four women,

powerhouses all and all forever unvanquished. I loved Grayce, Cherry, Peggy and May, and I miss them to this very moment.

As a matter of general fact, I would say that Japanese American women made redress happen. Among much else, they were much more willing to lobby Representatives and Senators face to face than were Japanese American men.

David asked me to speak to what lessons learned from the experience of redress might apply to the future of JACL as it seeks to advance the civil rights of Japanese Americans and all Americans in the years ahead. I would say four things.

First, the need for passionate leadership of the sort provided by Grayce, Cherry, Peggy, and May. Second, the need for karma or luck, the kind when the death of Sargent Kaz Masuda of the 442 became part of the life of 26-year-old Ronald Reagan in December, 1945. Of redress karma I will speak later.

Third, the need to win elections, as when the Democrats retook the Senate in 1986, a win that allowed the tireless Spark Matsunaga to put together a filibuster-proof 69-vote, bi-partisan majority among his colleagues for our bill. And fourth, a

capacity to talk to the other side – the 1980s was a time dominated politically by American conservatives.

Now I want to tell you the JACL story of redress karma, of how Ronald Reagan, arguably the most conservative president of the 20th century and a long time opponent of HR 442, came to sign our bill on August 10, 1988 – 30 years ago next month.

The hero of our story is Kazuo Masuda of Fountain Valley, California, where he grew up on a modest truck farm in then agricultural Orange County.

On August 27, 1944, Kaz was killed in action on the banks of the Arno River in Italy while serving as a member of the 442. Sergeant Masuda was 24 years old, and was to be awarded the Distinguished Service Cross.

While Kaz trained at Camp Shelby in Mississippi, he would visit his mother and father and his sisters Mary and June, who were imprisoned not far away in Jerome, Arkansas.

During one of his visits, Kaz said to Mary that if anything happened to him, he wanted to be buried in his hometown cemetery in Fountain Valley.

After Mary learned that Kaz had been killed, she got permission to travel to Fountain Valley, where she went to City Hall to make arrangements for her brother.

But the town fathers there said to Mary: “We’re sorry, but we don’t bury japs in our cemetery.”

Somehow word got to General Vinegar Joe Stilwell. In the China-India theater, Stilwell was the commanding officer of Colonel Frank Merrill of Merrill’s Marauders – a group of 2700 men, including 15 Japanese Americans of the Military Intelligence Service. All of the Marauders, all of them volunteers, fought, and died, and distinguished themselves behind Japanese lines in Burma.

Tying down an entire Japanese division for a year was not the only thing they did for their country. The Marauders suffered an 80% casualty rate, when 15% is considered astronomical.

Vinegar Joe respected and loved the Nisei soldier. So he got himself to Fountain Valley, and confronted the town fathers.

The General said, “This soldier is going to be buried here,

and I'm going to make an example of you SOB's and present the Distinguished Service Cross to Kaz's mother at a nice ceremony.

The town fathers backed down.

Invited to speak at the ceremony was a movie star, 26-year-old Army Captain Ronald Reagan.

But there was a big problem: Kaz's mother refused to accept the medal. What she felt was this: "They push us off our farm and into a scary camp next to a swamp. Then they take my son, and he comes back in box. And they want to give me a medal? No thank you."

"But Mom, a General, General Stilwell is coming to give you the medal," Mary said. "I don't care who he is," Mrs. Masuda said. "No thank you."

Finally, it was arranged for Mary to accept the medal. After Stilwell spoke, Ronald Reagan got up and said:

"The blood that has soaked into the sand is all one color. America stands unique in the world, the only country not founded on race, but on a way – an ideal. Not in spite of, but

because of our polyglot background, we have had all the strength in the world. That is the American way.

“Mr. and Mrs. Masuda, just as one member of the family of Americans, speaking to another member, I want to say for what your son Kazuo did – thank you.”

Many Japanese Americans knew that **Captain** Reagan spoke at Kaz’s ceremony, but how could we get word into **President** Reagan to remind him? I saw and asked Bill Bennett, a graduate school friend, to help; then Ed Rollins, campaign manager for Reagan’s 1984 landslide; and then Richard Wirthlin, Reagan’s pollster.

None of them could do anything.

After a meeting in the White House, Wirthlin called me and said that the top aides around Reagan were dead set against us. Wirthlin suggested that we hold off for a year. I said we couldn’t. We’d been at it for ten years and we were running out of gas.

At that time, the summer of 1987, I was book editor in New York, and one of my writers was Tom Kean, the Republican

Governor of New Jersey. I turned to him for help.

Tom said that the President was coming to New Jersey to campaign for Republican state legislative candidates in October, 1987. The Governor said he would bring up redress with the President as they travelled by limo around the state together.

Reagan said to Tom that he thought Japanese Americans were sent to camp for protective custody – something S. I. Hayakawa told both the President and Attorney General Ed Meese.

Tom said, “No, no, it wasn’t protective custody.” The next day, Tom called me and said, “Write me a letter speaking to that point and I’ll get to the President using a line of access for Republican governors.”

I said, “I can also get a letter from Kaz Masuda’s sister, saying please sign HR 442.” Tom said, “I’ll get her letter into him too.”

June Masuda Goto wrote:

Dear Mr. President:

Thank you for taking the time to read my letter.

Perhaps you recall a very special day for our family, December 9, 1945, when you came to a ceremony honoring my brother Kaz Masuda in Fountain Valley, California.... The presence of you and General Stilwell greatly affected the community, and led to a better life for our family.

Many times I have been asked to speak at the Kazuo Masuda middle school. I speak to all the history classes, and quote your words to the students....

If HR 442 comes to you, I hope you will look upon it favorably. All of us in our family – and I believe Kaz as well — would be greatly honored if you would. I also believe that America, through you, would honor itself.”

The President read June’s letter, called Governor Kean, and said, “ I remember that ceremony for Kaz Masuda. I’m asking our people to reconsider everything .”

After the President signed our bill, June Masuda Goto was led up to the podium to meet him. The President leaned down toward her, and asked, “Are you Mary?” June answered, “No, Mary is dead. I’m her sister June.” The President then clasped

June's right hand in both of his.

A Buddhist priest served our family while I was growing up. He once said, "Where there is gratitude, there also is civilization."

As we're here together today, I think we can be grateful to Kaz Masuda and his heroism on the battlefield, and grateful to Kaz's mother for resisting authority of the most imposing kind, and grateful to Mary for accepting life as it is, as it has to be; and grateful finally to General Stilwell for going the last mile to honor a fellow soldier.

We are the beneficiaries of the civilization that these four Americans helped to create.



Grant Ujifusa, JACL's Redress Strategy Chair, was knighted by the Government of Japan for reversing Ronald Reagan's opposition to HR 442