

Florin Chapter, Japanese American Citizens League, Sacramento

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Keynote Presentation

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Thank you so much for your kind introduction, and for the invitation to speak.

I am going to tell you 2 stories this evening—first, about the Davis School Board’s naming of the Fred T Korematsu Elementary School in Davis in the fall of 2005, and— second, about my parents’ work with Japanese Americans in Manzanar and in relocation hostels from 1942 through 1944.

My first story: Korematsu Elementary School in Davis.

I served as a board member of the Davis School Board for eight years, beginning in 1997 and ending Dec. 1, 2005, last month. In the late 1990s, we were a growing district, and passed a school facilities construction bond in 2000. So we have been building new schools in Davis. To help us select a name for each school, we appoint a school naming committee.

Last spring, we appointed a naming committee for our newest elementary school, which will open in fall 2006. I appointed one of my law professor colleagues, Prof. Madhavi Sunder, to the committee, because she lives near the new school and has 2 young children who will go there. Madhavi, like me, has long been interested in civil rights; she is of East Indian descent. Under our district’s naming policy, a school can be named after a deceased person, but not a living person. (In school districts, there is

always pressure to name something after your favorite teacher or principal who has just retired!)

On March 30, 2005, Fred Korematsu died. For those of us law professors interested in civil rights, Fred Korematsu is one of our heroes. His name is on a very famous, and very terrible, US Supreme Court opinion that we teach in our courses on Constitutional law. As you know, Mr. Korematsu was just an ordinary guy in 1942 when Exec. Order 9066 was issued. In fact, he was a 23-year-old welder in a Bay area shipyard. He refused to report for relocation and stayed behind in Oakland. In May 1942 he was arrested and unfairly accused of being a spy. The American Civil Liberties Union asked him if he would be willing to legally challenge the internment and he agreed. His case went all the way to the US Supreme Court, which in 1944, on a 6-3 vote, upheld the legality of the internment of American citizens of Japanese descent, one of the most disappointing Court opinions in American history. Korematsu's decision in 1942 to oppose the internment in court was very controversial among Japanese Americans, and he reported that he was shunned as a troublemaker both in the Topaz Internment Camp and later on in life.

Fred Korematsu, the person, probably would have faded into obscurity, but for a second law suit in the 1980s. In 1981, UC San Diego Professor Peter Irons, a legal historian, discovered suppressed government reports from Navy and other military authorities in 1942 that demonstrated the government, in fact, knew Japanese American citizens were not "disloyal" and posed no military threat on the West Coast. It appeared that the US Solicitor General had misrepresented these facts to the Supreme Court in his 1944 argument. Represented by a team of lawyers in San Francisco, Korematsu filed a proceeding in federal court to overturn his 1942 conviction. He succeeded. Federal Judge Marilyn Patel ruled in 1983 that the exclusion orders were unjustified, that the military commanders' views were tainted by racism, and that the federal government had altered, suppressed, and destroyed evidence relevant to the case before the Supreme Court in 1944. Korematsu's surprising victory in 1983 encouraged the successful campaign for national redress, then underway, which resulted in a formal US apology to the Japanese American community in 1988.

With Fred Korematsu's death in March 2005, Madhavi Sunder thought he would be a worthy figure of national importance to memorialize by naming a school after him. After doing research, she discovered no other school or public building yet bore his name. In the summer of 2005, Madhavi and I strategized about how to build support for naming the school Korematsu. She contacted prominent members of the Asian American community in Davis and Yolo County. The Arab American community was particularly supportive of the Korematsu name.

When the naming committee presented a list of names to the school board in early September, many people testified in support of Korematsu, including Andy Noguchi and several others from the Florin JACL. Students from our high school, and from the law school, told moving stories about their grandparents' experiences during internment and how important such a name would be to them. East Indian and other Asian American families from the Mace Ranch neighborhood near the school testified about how proud they would be for their children to attend a Korematsu school.

In mid September when it was time to make a decision on the name, opposition to the Korematsu named had developed. But folks were careful not to oppose Korematsu directly. The closest any of the opponents came was one person who said "Korematsu" would be too difficult for young children to pronounce. Most of the opposition focused on the need to have a "local connection" to the name of the school. One competing name was that of a Davis High School grad who was killed in Vietnam—that would have been a local connection. The larger group opposed to Korematsu simply wanted to call the school "Mace Ranch," the name of the housing development around the school.

After about 2 hours of public comment on the list of names, my board colleagues began to deliberate. Two of my 5 colleagues were opposed to Korematsu, one was clearly in support, and one person had not yet indicated where he stood. When it was my turn to speak, I decided to tell the story of my own parents' work with the Japanese American community during World War II. I wanted to establish that, in fact, there was another strong "local connection" to the Fred Korematsu story.

My Second Story: My parents work at Manzanar and in Resettlement

My parents, Ralph and Mary Smeltzer, came from a strong religious tradition, the Church of the Brethren, one of the 3 historic peace churches in the US, along with the Quakers and the Mennonites. The Brethren were dissenters in Germany in the early 1700s and were invited to Pennsylvania by William Penn—part of the Pennsylvania "Dutch" or "Deutsch."

In 1941, my parents were school teachers in Los Angeles. In early 1942 they began monitoring the situation facing the Japanese American community, requesting assistance from their church. In February 1942, when the Japanese American families on Terminal Island were given only 48 hours to move out, my dad took a day off from

teaching to help the families pack up. Because he was a pacifist, he had already been demoted from a regular teacher to a substitute, because he refused to sell defense stamps. As families began to be evacuated from LA, often in the early morning hours, my parents would get up at 5 am to help serve breakfast at the bus and train stations, to ease their journeys. During the summer of 1942, they participated in a Brethren workcamp in the central valley of California, building homes for farmworkers. When the Japanese American families in the surrounding area began to be rounded up and sent to the camps, they again met these families at the train stations and provided them with food for the journey. At one point the hostile crowds, yelling at the evacuees, became so threatening, the federal agents told the Brethren they could quit. But after a prayer session, the Brethren workcampers continued their support of the soon-to-be-internees.

In August 1942, my parents did not return to their teaching jobs in LA, but decided to apply for civil service jobs teaching in Manzanar, their way of protesting the government's treatment of their friends. High school at Manzanar began in October; my mother taught math and my father science. My mother talks about her school year teaching at Manzanar as one of her best years of teaching, because the students were so appreciative and so willing to learn. Even under the most difficult circumstances— few books, students sitting on the floor on newspapers.

Initially, my parents lived with the other Anglos outside of Manzanar's barbed wire. This seemed unjust to them, so they asked to live inside the camp. They were assigned as house parents to a barracks of young adult men, Kibei—American citizens who had been educated in Japan, and were, therefore, viewed more suspiciously than other members of the camp. My parents ate in the camp mess halls on occasion and learned to love Japanese food.

The scariest time was during the December 1942 so-called "riots" at Manzanar, when guards killed 2 people at the end of one of the mass rallies protesting conditions in the camp. One evening a friend came to my parents' room and asked my dad to help her husband, Togo Tanaka, get out of the camp. She was afraid he would be beaten up by others in the camp, part of the tension between the various factions. My dad agreed, and had Mr. Tanaka get on floor of his car. Dad then proceeded to drive fast out across the field toward the nearest guard tower. They made it, but the guard told my dad he was lucky. If the guard had seen the car coming, the guard would have shot him.

After one winter teaching school at Manzanar, and because of the horrible conditions in the camp, my parents decided they needed to find a way to help people get

out of the camps. Through the Church of the Brethren, they got permission to set up a relocation hostel in Chicago. As you know, Japanese Americans could live in the rest of the United States, just not on the West coast. If someone had a sponsor, and the possibility of a job, they could apply for relocation and leave the camps.

In March 1943 my parents left Manzanar. When they left, one of the Kibei from their barracks presented them with a beautiful set of 10 watercolors of Manzanar and the mountains, which now hang in my home. Recently, we gave digital copies of these paintings to the national visitors' center being established at Manzanar.

My mother left Manzanar in March, with 4 people from the camp, traveling by bus and train to Chicago, to the Brethren Seminary there. My father met them there, having traveled by car with another 4 people from the camp, stopping at other camps along the way to make arrangements to send people out of the camps to the new Chicago hostel. After living in the seminary for a few months, my parents set up the hostel in a large house near the shore of Lake Michigan, south of downtown Chicago. Most of the resettlers were young adults, but some families also came through the hostel. My mother remembers one family, the Oshimas, who returned to Sacramento after the war. My mother estimates that between April 1943 and April 1944, they were able to resettle over 1,000 Japanese Americans in Chicago. [I have read an article recently that reported over 20,000 Japanese Americans resettled in Chicago during the internment period.]

By April 1944, my parents thought enough people had resettled in Chicago. So they convinced the Church of the Brethren to move the hostel to Brooklyn, New York. When they arrived in New York, the hostility to the presence of any Japanese Americans was so great, they had to have 24 hour police protection for several weeks. The police also kept the former internees under surveillance, recording their names and where they moved when they left the hostel. My parents ended their service in August 1944. By then, my mother was 6 months pregnant with her first child, and my father accepted a job at the Brethren headquarters in Elgin, Illinois. At that time, my parents were 28 years old. So young! I was born 2 years later in 1946.

My father spent his life working on social justice issues for the church; he died at age 60 in 1976. But my mother just celebrated her 90th birthday. Last February, the National Japanese American Museum in Los Angeles honored all the people who taught school in the internment camps. My mother was among the 30 or so surviving teachers at the celebration. My mother commented that although teaching at Manzanar was important, the most important work, in her view, was the resettlement work, getting as many people as possible out of the camps. Growing up outside of Chicago with connections to the permanent Japanese American community there, and with the

beautiful Manzanar paintings on my wall, I have always appreciated my parents' work in responding to the pain of internment.

When I had a chance to help name a school after Fred Korematsu, it was a wonderful moment for me to honor both the Japanese American community and my parents, Mary and Ralph Smeltzer. Last September, when I told my parents' story to the Davis School Board, it was much shorter. But after I spoke, finally, my remaining board colleague indicated he would support the Korematsu name, if we would also include the words "Mace Ranch" in the official name of the school. So, on a 3 to 2 vote, the Davis School Board named our new school—the Fred T. Korematsu Elementary School at Mace Ranch.

This name will serve as a valuable reminder to Davis children and parents of how one ordinary person can make a difference in standing up for his civil rights, even in the face of great hostility and fear. This is such an important lesson today, when we are faced with another period of fear and hostility towards another ethnic group. One study in 2004 indicated that almost half of US citizens would support the restriction of civil rights of Muslim Americans. Together, we must always stand strong and resist such appeals to prejudice and fear.