

Isao Fujimoto

Ethnic studies pioneer gets his Ph.D. – at age 76

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Isao Fujimoto greets friends at his graduation party Thursday in Davis. He inspired far-flung groups to join forces. "He's the energizer bunny of social change," said former student Andy Noguchi

It took Isao Fujimoto 50 years to complete his Ph.D. in developmental sociology, but in that half century he changed the lives of tens of thousands of people.

Fujimoto recently received his doctorate from Cornell at age 76. As a young man, he put on hold his dissertation about California's multi-hued Central Valley and devoted his life "to making sure those who are most vulnerable – refugees, immigrant farmworkers and the poor – have food, shelter and basic civil rights," said former student Jesikah Maria Ross.

Fujimoto, a professor emeritus at the University of California, Davis, inspired armies of students and rural community organizers to join forces.

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Noguchi, civil rights chief of the Florin Japanese American Citizens League and one of thousands of former UC Davis students Fujimoto inspired to make a difference."

"Dynamic Mosaic," his dissertation, explores how "marginalized, unrecognized and diverse groups of immigrants can be energized to develop their communities," Fujimoto said.

He's entered the fields, churches and mosques of the Central Valley to meet indigenous farmers from Oaxaca, Mexico, who didn't speak English or Spanish, refugees and immigrants from Southeast Asia, Central America, Afghanistan, the former Soviet Union, Armenia, West Africa and Pakistan.

"The more you get to know people, the more interesting life becomes," he said at a graduation party last week in Davis, where guests feasted on sushi, noodles, hummus, apple pie and fresh pears, melons and vegetables.

Much of the menu came from the Davis Food Co-op and Farmers Market, which Fujimoto's students started in the early 1970s.

"We all met at his house, and he changed my life," recalled former Davis Mayor Ann Evans. "In my college diary I have a whole page on the first day I met Isao. He empowers people to realize their visions and make connections."

Fujimoto taught her that purchasing directly from the farm encourages "better health care, education and cultural engagement," Evans said. Fujimoto got a grant to recruit 10 students of color in 1968 and pioneered the Asian American Studies and Community Development programs at UC Davis. "You provided a beacon of hope for us on a campus that was overwhelmingly white," said Filipina activist Lillian Galedo.

The affable Fujimoto's secret is his genuine interest in people, said Sacramento attorney Albert Balingit. "When he meets you, he asks you 1,000 questions about your life before you even know who he is."

Fujimoto has crossed racial and ethnic boundaries his whole life. He grew up on the Yakima Indian Reservation in eastern Washington – the only place his family could lease farmland.

To eliminate competition from productive Japanese farmers, California and 16 other states had passed Alien Land Laws "that said people who could not apply for citizenship couldn't buy or rent land," Fujimoto said. Japanese immigrants weren't allowed to apply until 1952.

So 125 immigrant families settled on the Yakima reservation, which wasn't subject to state laws. "We used our hands to communicate, and there was one other language: baseball," said Fujimoto, who played second base for the Wapato Nippons against the Yakima Indians.

"I wanted to root for the Cleveland Indians until I learned there were no Indians on the team," said Fujimoto, who also played baseball at Japanese internment camps in Heart Mountain, Wyo., and Tule Lake during World War II.

He said he learned compassion from the American Friends Service Committee, which sent volunteers to the camps and helped 4,000 Japanese American students relocate to college.

After the war, Fujimoto's family settled in Coyote, an old Santa Clara County farm town where they share-cropped strawberries and cucumbers. He won a \$300 scholarship that covered half his annual expenses at the University of California, Berkeley.

After college, he worked as a probation officer in San Mateo County, "a job I got because I'd been on the wrestling and judo teams," he said.

He said he "started connecting people" during his stint as an Army war correspondent in the Korean War, where he "organized discussion groups between GIs and Korean students and helped at a crippled children's orphanage."

Then the Russians launched Sputnik, and the United States started training an army of science teachers. Fujimoto enrolled in a program at Howard University in Washington, D.C. "I figured the best way to learn both science and civil rights was to go to an all-black school."

He made headlines in 1968 when the United Farm Workers in Marysville asked for his help. "They said area schools refused to send buses to migrant camps, and kids had to walk to school on highways."

So he got his student assistant to drive one of the UC Davis red double-decker buses from England that said "Buckingham Palace" to take the students to school.

Growers complained to the administration. His assistant was fired; students protested.

Things really heated up at Davis when 150 American cities burned during the riots of 1968 following the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy, recalled Fujimoto.

Chancellor Emil Mrak declared a four-day moratorium on classes that inspired deep discussions. "Out of that came womens studies, ethnic studies and environmental studies," Fujimoto said.

Jack Forbes, who pioneered Native American Studies at Davis, said Fujimoto recruited students from farms and reservations "who were denied access to the usual levers of power and taught them how to change life in rural America ... he taught them kindness, sharing, democracy, justice and hope."

Fujimoto then asked everyone at the party to get acquainted. "People are different, they tend to stick together but there are ways to bring them together," he said.