

PERSONALITIES

A Personal History

Linda Camacho, 37, is directly connected to the history of immigrants and racism, not only as a social studies teacher, but also as a person of Japanese-Mexican descent.

By JULIE HA
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Linda Camacho knows her history. And that makes sense since she teaches social studies at Lennox Middle School. But moreover, for Camacho, history represents not only a political issue, but also a personal issue—one that has led her to a life of activism in and out of the classroom.

Camacho's knowledge of history led to her concern for and participation in the movement to defeat Proposition 187, the ballot initiative to deny publicly funded services to undocumented immigrants. She took part in this effort because she knew the movement to pass 187 was just a symptom of something this nation had tasted before: immigrant scapegoating.

In many senses, the struggle to fight the initiative, though it eventually passed, carried with it a similar spirit of justice found in the Japanese American redress movement.

For Camacho, in fact, both movements hit close to home, since her mother is Japanese American and part of an ethnic community interned during World War II and her father is a Mexican immigrant, representing a community whom many 187 critics believe was targeted by the recent initiative.

Fittingly, as a middle school history teacher, Camacho wants to impart to her students an important lesson, one she has learned on a personal and political level: The past and the present are interwoven. The struggle lies in understanding that the suffering felt by one community now has been experienced by another in the past. If you know what it feels like to suffer, don't inflict the same harm on another group, but fight it.

"The more I can link the past with the present, the better my students will be able to understand how important history is," explained Camacho, 37, who has been teaching at Lennox Middle School near Inglewood for 11 years.

"People need to remember the suffering of their own community, those same sufferings have been experienced by other people of color. Because they know what it's like, they need to fight against it."

Referring to the internment and the new wave of anti-immigrant sentiment, Camacho commented, "what happened before can happen again."

"When a country's in hardship, they need a scapegoat. Immigrants are a good scapegoat."

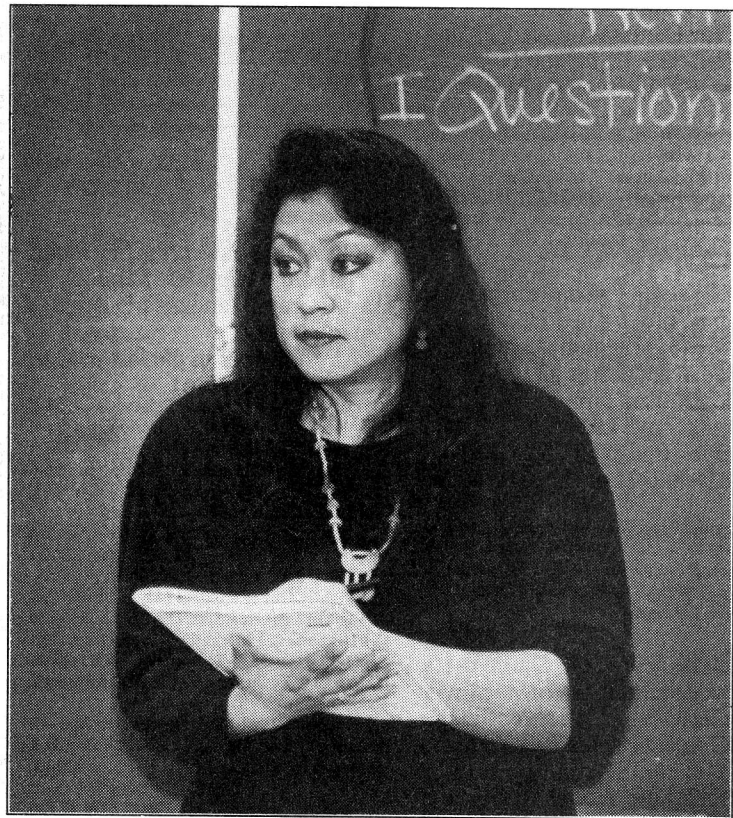
As a bicultural person, Camacho knows intimately what it feels like to stand in another person of color's shoes, since she wears a dual identity as a Mexican-Japanese American.

Her bicultural upbringing and experience allows her to see clearly the connection between the Japanese American internment and the wave of anti-immigrant sentiment rearing its head in recent years through looking at her own family's victimization and at history's lessons.

Camacho will be speaking about this link between past and present at the Day of Remembrance event presented by the National Coalition for Redress/Reparations Sunday, Feb. 19, at the Centenary United Methodist Church in Little Tokyo.

The event, titled "Fifty Years After Camp: Racism and Resistance Then and Now," commemorates the 50-year anniversary of the signing of the order to place Japanese Americans in internment camps by President Franklin Roosevelt.

Camacho, standing in her classroom at Lennox during a lunch break, admitted she is a little nervous about speaking Sunday



JIN SHIN/Rafu Shimpō

Linda Camacho

students. It was really surprising how a lot of students were getting into (the anti-187 effort)."

"This (was) history in action," Camacho added. "We mobilized students to go on that march, got 50 or so students who made banners, took students precinct-walking, had meeting after school. The students got exposed to a lot."

From their experience, the youth at Lennox gained a sense of political activism rooted in the possibility of change, which is the reason Camacho became a teacher.

"The whole reason I got into teaching was that I felt the educational system needed some help. When I started learning about history and about all that's left out, especially about people of color, I got into the teaching program and I started getting hyped up because I thought I could really make some changes. I could introduce (students) to Chicano studies and Asian and African American studies, so they can get a more accurate picture of history."

Camacho gained her political activism in college where she took classes on the different histories of various ethnic communities.

After transferring from the University of California at Santa Barbara to UCLA, she joined the Mexican American political organization MEChA. She and some other women ran for office with this organization that historically had carried only male leaders. Although they faced resistance from many male members of MEChA, Camacho and her peers won the offices.

One of Camacho's goals that year was to build coalitions with other student groups of color. She recalled how the personal and political meshed as one during one meeting with some Native American, African American and Asian American students, and her bicultural identity came into play. One male member of MEChA made the comment in Spanish, "Why are we working with these *p_nchi chinitos* (expletive Chinese)?"

"I just blew it," recalled Camacho. "I said, 'How dare you undermine what we're trying to do here. We're trying to build a coalition. And I take personal insult to that because my mother's Japanese—you've got a problem with that?'"

Camacho remembers the man's jaw dropping because, unlike the female officers from MEChA, this member did not know about her bicultural background.

admitted she is a little nervous about speaking Sunday.

But a fellow teacher advised her to pretend she's speaking to a classroom of her eighth-graders. That seems sound advice since the teacher of 13 years carries a presence about her that commands attention and respect from her students.

She exhibits great patience in explaining questions about the pre-American Revolution period, but she firmly warns students about the school's policy on missed homework assignments. The classroom atmosphere comes across as open and non-threatening, as "Ms. Camacho" walks up and down the rows of desks and explains concepts to individual students, occasionally joking with them.

After one student asked why they must write questions on the front of their papers and the answers on the back, Camacho replied coolly and with a grin, "There's a reason for everything you do here."

Camacho's students apparently took this lesson to heart. Predominantly Latino, the class felt targeted by the Proposition 187 movement, whose supporters ran ads that highlighted immigration from south of the border.

To respond to this, Camacho told students different ways they could address this perceived attack on their community. They learned that while reading about history in the classroom, they could make history out of the classroom.

Many Lennox students and some teachers took part in the "Great March" to defeat Proposition 187 last October along Cesar Chavez Avenue. Some students went precinct-walking with activists from anti-187 coalitions and did preelection phonebanking. Camacho also incorporated the initiative into her lesson plan, holding a debate featuring teams arguing for and against the proposition. The *Daily Breeze* and the *Los Angeles Times* featured articles in their papers on the young activists at Lennox.

Camacho found that 187 communicated the message to students, more than any chapter in their textbooks, that history is important.

"It's fine to know history ... but for (the students), they can really care less, so you have to find a way to make it more real for them," Camacho explained. "The 187 stuff really hit home for a lot of my

In many senses, this incident just represented one of many where people would think of her as either full Japanese American or full Mexican American and would inadvertently make negative comments about the other ethnic group, not thinking she's one of "them." Although it was difficult facing that alienation, Camacho believes it also gave her a special role as a bridge between cultures and ethnicities.

Further, it serves as a reminder of what her parents went through when they tried to get married during the anti-miscegenation era of the 1950s.

"Nobody wanted to marry them," explained Camacho. Finally, the couple found a Catholic priest who said he would as long as Camacho's mother converted to Christianity. But even after they were married, the interracial couple had a hard time finding a place to live.

"My dad went, got the place, and then when he went back with my mom, the owner took a look at my mom and dad together and all of sudden said the place was not for rent anymore," Camacho recalled the story.

After all, Camacho's parents were marrying during the mid-50s, when anti-Japanese sentiment was at its peak. Just prior to that, Camacho's mother fell victim to this sentiment as she was interned at age seven with her family at Tule Lake. Camacho's grandparents lost their tofu business on San Pedro Street. While Camacho's grandmother believed the internment was meant to protect Japanese Americans from harm, her grandfather resented the camps.

After the war, Camacho's grandfather was completely anti-American and moved his family to Japan and later to Hawaii. Camacho's mother came to Los Angeles with her aunt later and attended night school to improve her English; it is here where she met her husband who just immigrated from Mexico.

This personal history and her bicultural identity keeps Camacho's spirit of understanding other cultures and building bridges active. She brings this spirit not only to her teaching, but to her work as the regional secretary of the Mexican American Political Association (MAPA), a group that emphasizes political empowerment.

Camacho became more active in this group after she realized she needed to be just as much a part of making history as she was teaching it. "At one point, I decided I need to do more than this (teaching)," Camacho said. "I asked myself, 'What am I really giving to students if I'm not doing anything outside the realm of teaching at the school.'"

Married to a Gilbert Sanchez, an activist as well who works as a coordinator of the Gang Violence Bridging Project at the Pat Brown Institute of Foreign Affairs, with two children, Camacho is enjoying her work and personal life. She believes she will likely teach for a while because her students continually teach her not to give up on youth, though many at Lennox face daily temptations of drugs and gangs.

"They definitely give me a lot of hope," Camacho said reflectively. "Hope in terms of they're going to fight to make this world a better place. ... In my own way, because of my teaching style, I encourage students to be active politically. I make them see how important is to know what's going on. That's different from reading a book and making them answer questions at the end of the chapter.

"They need to be responsible for their futures," Camacho continued. "One of these days, it's going to be their turn to be out there, to be making those changes. I have an opportunity to prepare these leaders.

"They are going to be somebody someday. I need to prepare those somebodies."



JIN SHIN/Rafu Shimpo

Camacho, here teaching social studies to her students at Lennox Middle School near Inglewood.

Linda Camacho will be one of the speakers for the Los Angeles Day of Remembrance on Sunday, Feb. 19, at Centenary United Methodist Church, 300 S. Central Ave., Little Tokyo. Admission is free. For more information, call (213) 680-3484.