

“The Most Important Thing I Ever Did In My Life” by Guy Aoki

At the time NCRR was planning on lobbying Congress to pass HR 442-- July 25-29, 1987-- I was 25 years old and making \$5 an hour at “American Top 40 with Casey Kasem” (OK, I got \$10 an hour when I mixed that radio show, but that was like two-and-a-half hours a week). When I heard how much it would cost for plane fare to Washington D.C. and the five star hotel Bert Nakano set up, I wasn't sure if I could afford it. But when Kim Hee, who wasn't even Japanese American, enthusiastically told me, “Oh, yeah, I'm going for sure! You are too, right?,” I began to realize I'd be foolish not to participate.

It took a full year for my bank account to get back to where it was pre-trip, but journeying to our nation's capital was the single most important thing I ever did in my life. And it *changed* my life. There were 140 of us divided into 15 teams. Suzy Katsuda was my team leader, but she insisted I take over because I was better prepared. I did so much research on redress and the five congressmen we were to meet with that no one could win an argument with me. Redress and reparations had to be passed. Apologize. Admit the government was wrong and we were loyal citizens. And show your sincerity by giving compensation for the lives you ruined, the people you hurt.

During lunch, I briefed my team (which included one of the youngest lobbyists-- 16 year old Tara Akashi-- and one of the oldest-- 82 year old (?) David Imahara) on the voting records of the elected officials we were about to meet. If one was a Reagan Republican, we approached it one way; if he was a Democrat, we had another strategy.

The night before the lobbying began, I talked with my roommates, Frank Irizawa and Mike Kodama. We all recognized the historic significance of what we were about to do. Frank talked about his uncle, a quiet man who wasn't very political. He mentioned to a group of people that Frank was going to lobby Congress and simply said, “Frank's a good man.”

Emotionally, I admitted I was afraid of screwing up. But I wasn't going to; I was speaking for those who'd already passed away and those who wanted to join us on this trip but couldn't.

My representative from Glendale was Carlos Moorhead, a conservative Republican who voted about 90% of the time for what Reagan wanted. Great. When we talked about how the concentration camps hurt our community, Moorhead pointed out how well the Japanese were doing in downtown Los Angeles. We jumped on him, pointing out we weren't Japanese nationals and didn't benefit from their success.

I told him how I read the obituary section of the *Rafu Shimpo* and read the names of the people who were dying on a daily basis-- people who never heard an apology from their government-- people who never heard confirmation that their incarceration wasn't their fault. My voice cracked.

"Whew!," he said, "I can see this issue means a lot to you people." Damn right! After I barraged him with more pro-redress information, he said, "Look, you raise a lot of good points! I can't argue with you anymore! But I'm sorry, I can't vote for this bill."

Leaving his room, the women-- including Mary Ann Sakaue and Suzy Katsuda-- were so frustrated. They wanted to bang their heads against the wall. I told them no one could've done a better job than we did in that meeting. It wasn't our fault that Moorhead couldn't get it. We should feel nothing but pride.

Later that night, Dave Urmston told me with a warm smile, "Guy, you should've heard what the women were saying about you at the bar!" They liked how I ran the meeting, how when Moorhead tried to veer off-topic, I firmly put him right back on it. It was a great feeling.

When it came down to the House vote on September 17th, none of our five congressmen turned their votes from a "no" to a "yes" because of our lobbying (one became a co-sponsor of the bill the day before our appointment).

But flying back to Los Angeles and writing in my journal, I began to realize I'd always had leadership abilities that'd laid dormant for years. I'd been regarded as a leader dating back to elementary school but

didn't run for student body offices from intermediate school on because it'd become more of a popularity contest. I wondered where this was going to take me. Yes, I wanted to step up my involvement, but in what?

Four years later, with the media doing irresponsible coverage of the 50th anniversary of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, which led an increase in hate crimes, I realized I had to form a media watchdog group to fight back. On April 9th, 1992, Media Action Network for Asian Americans (MANAA) was born.