

# OCHAZUKE

## WE DID IT!

By TAKESHI NAKAYAMA

"WE DID IT!"

Those words were printed on a sign hanging on the wall at the Office of Redress Administration in Washington, D.C., last Tuesday as ORA executive director Bob Bratt and his staff celebrated after the national redress ceremony.

That sign echoed the sentiments of all people concerned with obtaining justice for victims of U.S. government-instituted injustices against Americans of Japanese ancestry during World War II.

The official redress payment ceremony was a momentous occasion. Japanese America had "beaten City Hall," so to speak. Against all odds, the community, through dedication and hard work, accomplished the impossible—gaining an official government apology and reparations for Nikkei who were forcibly evacuated from their West Coast homes and relocated inland or interned in camps during World War II.

Legislators attending the ceremony who helped make redress a reality for Nikkei included Hawaii Senators Daniel Inouye and Daniel Akaka, and California Congressmen Robert Matsui, Norman Mineta and Mervyn Dymally.

Sadly, Senator Sparky Matsunaga of Hawaii, who led the fight in Congress to pass the redress legislation, could not be there to appreciate the fruits of his labor. He died in April.

Volunteer supporters in the redress campaign who were recognized by Bratt at the ceremony included the Japanese American Citizens League, represented by national president Cressey Nakagawa; the National Coalition for Redress and Reparations, represented by national spokesperson Bert Nakano; and National Coalition for Japanese American Redress, represented by William Hohri.

As I sat there at the Great Hall of the Department of Justice—with Southern California NCR members Nakano, Miya Iwataki and Kay Ochi, and Northern California NCR member Tsuyako "Sox" Kitashima—in the audience of about 250 persons, I could feel, as Rep. Mineta described it, "a sense of exhilaration and yet sadness."

Exhilaration because, after all the pain, suffering, humiliation and degradation of those war years and carrying the burden of being labeled as "disloyal" for the last 48 years, Japanese America had been vindicated. "We have been made whole again," as Matsui put it.

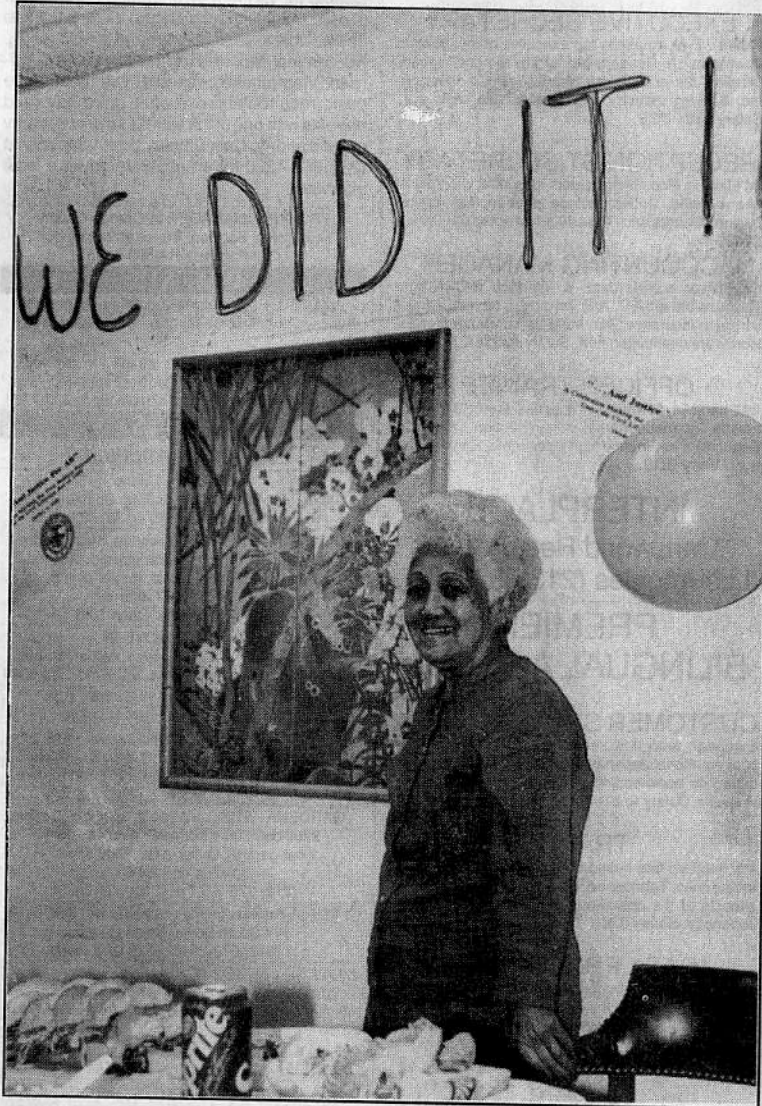
There was a sense of sadness for all those Nikkei who endured the hardships of discrimination and internment, but died before the redress legislation became law.

Japanese Americans suffered tremendous losses when they were forcibly removed from their West Coast homes and evacuated inland or interned in the so-called "relocation centers."

Returning to the West Coast after the war, many Nikkei discovered they had no place to live. Many who had owned homes lost them. There was a housing shortage, along with blatant racism, and it was almost impossible for Japanese to find homes to rent. To add insult to injury, all too often those who left their possessions in the care of others for safekeeping found their property had been lost or stolen.

Those returnees without homes to go to were housed either in hostels, such as the large one on Evergreen Ave. in Boyle Heights, or in public housing at makeshift trailer camps—in Burbank, Sun Valley, Long Beach, El Segundo and Hawthorne, among other sites.

I regret that my father, who, with my mother reared seven small children—three born in camp—during those turbulent years during and after the war, could not be there to enjoy the victory. My father did what he could to keep food in our bellies, a roof over our heads and clothes on our backs, at Rohwer, Arkansas, at trailer camps in Burbank, Hawthorne



**CELEBRATING VICTORY**—Tsuyako "Sox" Kitashima of the Northern California NCR, joins the victory celebration at the Office of Redress Administration in Washington on Tuesday, Oct. 9, to commemorate the payment of the first redress checks to nine Japanese American senior citizens that morning at the U.S. Department of Justice.

—Photo By TAKESHI NAKAYAMA

and El Segundo, and later on in Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles. He deserved redress, as did all Japanese Americans who struggled through those trying times.

Traumatized, stigmatized and impoverished, the Nikkei, nevertheless, scratched and clawed their way out of the pits of poverty and despair. They gained respectability and achieved a fair share of success. For the most part, they became part of the mainstream. But hidden deep inside were feelings of inferiority and shame—because they had been branded as "disloyal" and treated (or mistreated) as if they were enemy aliens.

Passage of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, and especially the distributing of the first redress checks, have helped Japanese Americans to exorcize those demons from their souls and gain a sense of vindication.

"We have regained our dignity," one Nisei former internee said.

"Victory is ours. We did it!"