

'Evening of Remembrance' Focuses on Those Denied Redress

The cases of Japanese Latin Americans and railroad workers, and Alan Kondo's video, "Justice Now, Reparations Now," highlight the Thursday night program at the Japanese American National Museum.

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"An Evening of Remembrance," was presented by the National Coalition for Redress and Reparations (NCRR) on Thursday night at the Japanese American National Museum to commemorate President Franklin Roosevelt's signing on Feb. 19, 1942, of Executive Order 9066. The order authorized the mass evacuation and internment of Japanese Americans.

The estimated 60 people attending the program, held in the museum's Legacy Center, watched Alan Kondo's video, "Redress Now, Reparations Now," and were reminded that although most people have already received their redress checks, there are thousands whose claims for compensation have been denied.

Kondo's 30-minute video captured the spirit of the people and the grass-roots movement for redress during the 1980s. It included the pivotal lobbying trip to Washington, D.C., in 1987 and the passing of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988.

Filmmaker Kondo called the fight for reparations "a community effort ... to overturn an injustice," and noted that the redress campaign was a multi-generational—involving Issei, Nisei, Sansei and Yonsei—and multi-ethnic movement.

"We understood we couldn't win the fight unless we reached out to other organizations ... We understood the Japanese American community couldn't do it alone," he said.

Kondo commented that when Japanese Americans won reparations, "all of us gained power. We found out when we won, it gave us a tremendous responsibility to help other groups step out of their prisons."

The program included an update by Kay Ochi, vice president of NCRR's Los Angeles chapter, on the redress efforts and highlighted the cases that have been denied by the Office of Redress Administration (ORA).

Ochi reminded the audience that the ORA will be closing in 1998, so claimants for reparations have a little more than one year to file for and receive redress.

"Although, to this date, 80,128 redress checks have gone out ... we are focused on the thousands who have not received their redress checks," she said.

Ochi pointed out that applicants who have been denied compensation include railroad workers in the



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Attorney Bruce Iwasaki of NCRR speaks at the "Evening of Remembrance" program, held Thursday night at the Japanese American National Museum. Looking on are, from left, Robin Toma, Sugi Takahashi, Carmen Mochizuki and Steve Nagano.

west who were summarily fired after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, and Japanese Latin Americans kidnapped from their countries and brought to the United States to be held as hostages to exchange for White Americans held in Japan.

The Campaign for Justice has filed a lawsuit in August and is conducting a letter-writing campaign to President Clinton to support their fight for redress and justice for the 2,200 Japanese Latin Americans from 13 countries who were incarcerated in U.S. concentration camps.

Carmen Mochizuki, a Japanese Peruvian and plaintiff in a lawsuit against the government, shared her family's history.

She was 11 years old when the government of Peru rounded up prominent Japanese Peruvian families and handed them over to the United States government to be imprisoned in Texas. "We lost everything," she said. "When I think back on those days, I feel so bad my mother and father won't see redress. No one will believe such a tragic thing has occurred."

Speaking about the World War II misdeeds of the United States, civil rights attorney Robin Toma said the U.S. government "hatched schemes to go south of the border to reach into 13 countries in Latin America to ensure that they would have thousands more people of Japanese ancestry that they could bring into camps of the United States and use for prisoner exchange fodder with Japan."

Nikkei Latin Americans were completely uprooted from their homes and imprisoned in U.S. camps, mostly in Crystal City, Texas, Toma said. "The officials knew at a very early point the Japanese Latin Americans posed no threat. Officials from the State Department knew the evidence being gathered was shoddy. They knew it was a sham."

The prisoners brought to this country were stripped of their passports and other legal documents, and they

were then classified as illegal aliens to justify their being locked up in INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) camps. Because of their "illegal" immigration status, they were denied redress by the ORA.

"We believe not only that grossly unfair, that it's unconstitutional. We believe it's a type of discrimination that is not permitted under our Constitution," Toma said.

It was only after trying unsuccessfully to get the government to grant those Japanese Latin Americans redress that the Campaign for Justice decided to file a lawsuit. "We were left with no other choice," the civil rights attorney said.

"What we're looking for is to have people pressure the administration, to let them know that Clinton, who has told Germany to give redress to a U.S. citizen who was caught there ... and here we have the U.S. government denying redress to Peruvian Japanese and other Latin American Japanese because they weren't U.S. citizens," Toma said. "What's worse is the U.S. government ensured that they weren't U.S. citizens or permanent resident aliens."

Toma added, "Justice delayed is justice denied. Over 50 years have passed since this occurred. People are getting older, people are passing away ... It's time for the government to do the right thing."

Also denied redress, and justice, was a little-known category of people—railroad workers in Wyoming and Nevada. Sugi Takahashi's husband, Tatsu, and 50 other families of Japanese descent were fired from their jobs at the Union Pacific Railroad in 1941, but were denied redress by the ORA because they could not prove that the firing was due to any government action.

These railroad workers' assets were frozen, and Tatsu Takahashi, who was then 42 years old and one year short of being eligible for retirement from the railroad, was denied any pension.

Sugi Takahashi, now 82 years old, has filed a lawsuit. She spoke of the hardships her family faced struggling to survive on their own during World War II. Her husband had to take a job in another area 40 miles away from their Cheyenne, Wyo., home, topping sugar beets. And since the movement of Japanese Americans was restricted, he had to first obtain permission from the attorney general.

A mother of three children, she had to do other people's laundry at her home to make ends meet, when her husband was unemployed, Takahashi recalled.

She remembered that the Nikkei couldn't have more than five people together at any time, they had to stay off the streets after 8 p.m., and they had their radios, cameras, swords and guns taken away.

Attorney Bruce Iwasaki of NCRR, who is working with the former railroad workers denied redress, said, "We're still part of the videotape ... We're all still sharing experiences with each other, and that's a very important

process, a process that led to the passage of the redress act. I think it's a process that's going to lead to more people being granted redress payments."

Iwasaki said people can help the cause of the Nikkei Latin Americans, the railroad workers and others denied redress by doing research, contributing money, writing letters to Congress and the president, and attending fundraisers—such as the Campaign for Justice's event Feb. 27 and NCRR's Day of Remembrance program and concert on March 22.

Thursday's program was sponsored by the Japanese American National Museum and the Education Committee of the National Coalition for Redress and Reparations (NCRR).

The Campaign for Justice presents "Adios to Tears," a send-off party on Thursday, Feb. 27, for Japanese Latin American internees and supporters traveling to Washington, D.C., in March.

The party, which starts at 6:30 p.m., will feature campaign updates, personal testimony from Alice Nishimoto, Japanese Peruvian former internee. The event is scheduled for Don Felix Peruvian Restaurant, 4435 Fountain Ave., Los Angeles. Admission is \$25 for buffet dinner and live music, \$30 at door. Call (213) 626-4471 to order tickets.

The National Coalition for Redress and Reparations (NCRR) will hold a Day of Remembrance fundraising event on Saturday, March 22, from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m., at the Japan America Theatre, 244 S. San Pedro St., Los Angeles.

The program, which will feature jazz artists Keiko and Kazu Matsui and performance artist Lane Nishikawa, is intended to raise money to support the lawsuits of those denied redress.

For information, call NCRR at (213) 680-3484.

Rafu Shimpu 2/21/97