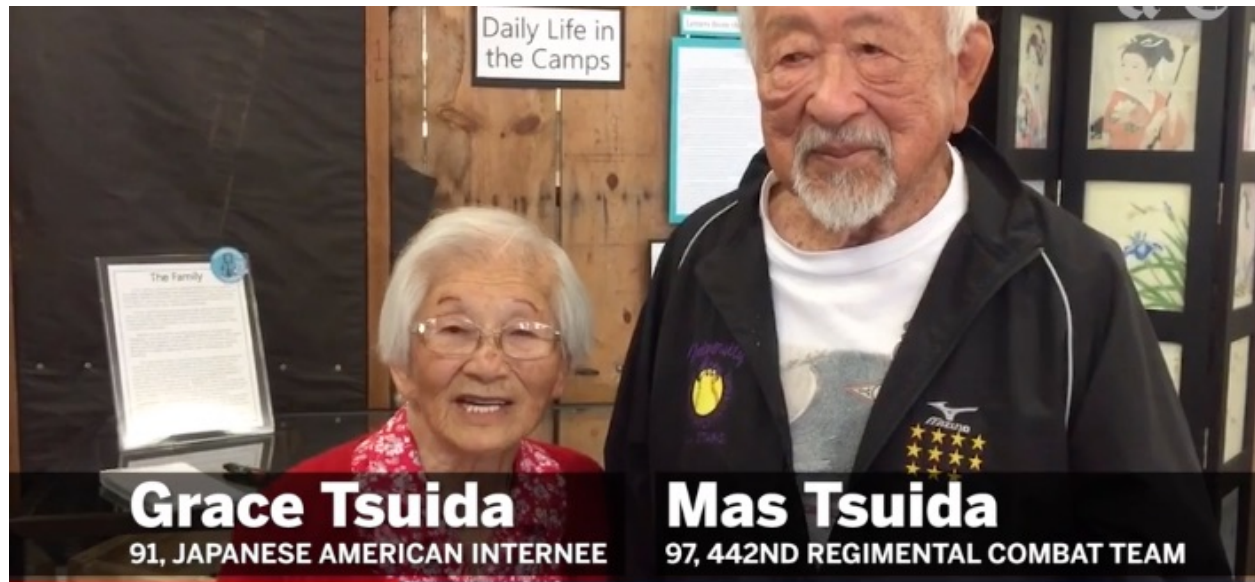


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Exhibit stirs up memories for Japanese internee



The “Uncommon Ground: Behind the Barbed Wire” exhibit, at MiraCosta College, was a year in the making.

by Pam Kragen

Seventy-five years ago this month, 15-year-old Grace Kaminaka was yanked from her sophomore studies at Grossmont High School and forced into an internment camp for Japanese Americans in Arizona.

For three years during World War II, she and her family endured privation, separation, boredom, dust storms and extreme heat under armed guard. But life at the Poston War Relocation Center wasn't all bad.

It was there where she met her husband of 72 years, Mas Tsuida, and where she forged new friendships and skills of self-reliance. At 91, Grace K. Tsuida no longer carries any resentment about her family's imprisonment. It was, she said, what it was.

“We say ‘shikata ga nai,’ which means ‘it can't be helped,’” said Tsuida, now a great-grandmother who lives with her husband in University City. “I was so young when I went there that I just went with the flow. I really didn't understand it, but I didn't argue. We did what they told us to do.”

Tsuida, who was born in El Cajon, is one of several local internees who have shared their personal artifacts and memories with MiraCosta College, which is commemorating the 75th

anniversary with a multimedia exhibition at its Oceanside campus, “Uncommon Ground: Behind the Barbed Wire.”

The large-scale exhibit, which runs through April 28, includes two free special events: a documentary screening on April 6 and a panel discussion with Tsuida and other internees on April 27 at the college’s San Elijo campus.

On March 31, the Tsuidas toured the eye-popping exhibit in MiraCosta’s library. The two-story foyer is filled with artificial barbed wire, a large-scale model of the Manzanar internment camp and a 20-foot-tall re-creation of a camp guard tower that rises to the ceiling.

At each display throughout the library, Tsuida offered a few of her own memories. Sometimes she laughed, talking about the recreational activities like dances and baseball games. At other times, she spoke matter-of-factly about the toll it took on her parents and siblings.

“Our family had been very close and we always ate our meals together at home. We didn’t have that in the camps. The children ate together away from the adults. There was no family unity. That was the hardest part,” she said.

The “Uncommon Ground” exhibit was a year in the making. The interactive project was conceived in spring 2016 by library department chair Richard Ma. Library directors Myla Stokes Kelly and Michelle Strauss Onstad developed the exhibition with help from local artists and Linda Canada, archivist for the Japanese American Historical Society of San Diego.

MiraCosta design students built exhibits and English and art students submitted poetry and drawings for display.

Kelly, who curates exhibits at the San Elijo campus, said “Uncommon Ground” is an important educational tool for students.

“One of the goals of this college is to create global awareness and community involvement, so this is right in line with our mission,” she said.

Onstad said it’s just a coincidence that the exhibit opened at a time of heightened anti-immigrant sentiment and fear of roundups, but students have remarked on the irony. Visitors are encouraged to write their thoughts on paper tags like those worn by camp internees, and at least one wrote that the exhibit “reminds me of Trump.”

Throughout the library are replicas of the original signs tacked up across the West Coast in the months after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. On Feb. 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which resulted in the internment of nearly 120,000 Japanese Americans in 10 camps throughout the Western U.S.

The Kaminaka family, who were row farmers in Lemon Grove, had just a few weeks to sell everything they owned and report — along with about 2,000 other San Diegans — for relocation to Poston. They were allowed to bring along only as much as they could carry with their hands, Canada said.

One display, built from memory by local internee Frank Wada, is a re-creation of the rustic barracks where families lived in cramped, barren conditions.

Tsuida said she remembers the camp as brutally hot, and plagued with dust storms. She learned to visit the communal showers in the late afternoons, rather than the mornings, because there was a better chance of finding hot water.

Other displays feature period clothing, school yearbooks, old Frank Sinatra records played at the camp dances, uniforms from the camp baseball leagues, and a variety of toys, shower sandals, flags and other items that internees made from scraps of wood and fabric.

“They did what they could with what they had,” Tsuida said.

Many of the displays spotlight the young Japanese American men who served in the segregated, highly decorated 442nd Regimental Combat Team. One of them was Mas Tsuida, now 97. The San Diego native was on a fishing boat near Panama when Pearl Harbor was attacked. He was assigned within weeks to the 442nd.

He said he would’ve happily enlisted and was proud to serve his country — like his wife, he’s “nisei,” the American-born son of “issei,” or Japanese immigrants. Even though his family was sent to two camps, Mas Tsuida said he understands the government’s reasoning for the internment.

He was on furlough visiting his sister at Poston in 1943 when he first spied his future wife and began writing her love letters from a “lonely soldier.” They married after the war in Chicago, where Grace (like many other women internees) had been allowed out of the camp in 1945 to fill a job at a greeting-card factory (vacancies were rife with all able-bodied men overseas). They returned to San Diego, where he spent 38 years as a commercial tuna fisherman before retiring. They had three children, who all went on to careers in military and government service.

After walking through the exhibit on Friday, Grace Tsuida said she was impressed by the variety of displays and MiraCosta’s commitment to keeping history alive.

While it recalls a dark period in history, she likes to remember the good. Her childhood classmates and the people she met in Chicago during the war always treated her with kindness and without prejudice.

“Yes, I thought we were discriminated against,” she said, “but I felt much worse for the black people. They had it so much worse.”

“Uncommon Ground: Behind the Barbed Wire”

When: 8 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. Mondays-Thursdays. 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. Fridays. 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturdays. Through April 28.

Where: Library & Information Hub, MiraCosta College, 1 Barnard Drive, Oceanside. Select exhibits at MiraCosta’s San Elijo campus, 3333 Manchester Ave., Cardiff.

Special events:

“A Bitter Legacy” film screening and Q&A with filmmaker Claudia Katayanagi. 6-8 p.m. Thursday, April 6. Room 3601, Oceanside campus.

“Japanese American Internees Tell Their Stories” panel discussion. 12:45-1:45 p.m. April 27. Building 900, San Elijo campus.

Admission: Free. Parking permit required (\$1).

Online: library.miracosta.edu/9066/main