

2023 Arnold Maeda Manzanar Pilgrimage Grant Essay

Toshiko “Alice” Matsunaga. This is my Bachan, a sweet 86-year-old Japanese American mother to three children and currently lives in Santa Clarita, California. She shares the same story as Arnold Maeda as well as 120,000 other Japanese American incarcerated during WWII. This is a story covered up by the passing times but is one layered with the resilience and courage of hundreds of thousands of Japanese Americans like my Bachan and Maeda; I seek to uncover these stories myself and share them with my community to prevent such injustices from happening again.

Maeda, just a 15-year-old boy, and my Bachan, just a 6-year-old girl, were both forcibly removed from their lives and everything they knew to reside in the Manzanar incarceration camp. Although faced with the adversity of the times, Maeda emerged as class president of Manzanar High School, essentially restarted his life from the ground up, and stepped into a community leader and activist role for the Japanese American community in Venice¹. With the determination and passion to commemorate the 1,000 incarcerated Japanese Americans who once lived in his hometown area, Maeda ensured that their stories and this stain on American history would be remembered by including the experiences of fellow Japanese American incarcerated on the VJAMM². He wanted to ensure that these stories, these peoples’ lives, were not forgotten.

Maeda’s work inspires me to pick up the torch and shine light on such stories. Encouraged by the sacrifices and resilience of those within the Japanese American community such as Maeda, I chose to take up the fight by interviewing my Bachan and her children about

¹“Arnold Maeda Obituary (1926 - 2020) - Los Angeles, CA - Los Angeles Times.” *Legacy.com*, <https://www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/latimes/name/arnold-maeda-obituary?id=7328582>.

²“Home - Venice JAMM.” *Venice JAMM*. <https://venicejamm.org/>

how the camps affected their lives. In a 25-minute documentary that I named *Executive Order 9066: Internment, Injustice, and Intergenerational Trauma*, I learned about my own family's history in the incarceration camps and how its lasting effects have translated to my dad and have passed down to me, even 80 years after the fact. Like Maeda, I have shared my family's story with others, in both UCLA's Nikkei Student Union and Kyodo Taiko team. From this, I hoped to shed light on the untold stories of Japanese American WWII incarcerated and to empower my peers to dig up their own uncovered histories. As an intern with the Manzanar Committee, I will follow in Maeda's footsteps to create lasting change within my community and to become more of a witness to the unspoken lives of the Japanese American incarcerated.

Maeda's story has taught me that anyone can evoke change and become a beacon of hope for others. Especially amidst the uncertainties of the COVID-19 pandemic and the anti-Asian hate across the country, it is crucial now that I stick to my values of empathy and selflessness in the face of adversity like Maeda did. Through collaboration, conversation, and an unyielding resolve, we can rewrite the current narrative on Japanese American incarceration and remember the stories of Arnold Maeda, of Toshiko "Alice" Matsunaga, and of the 120,000 incarcerated Japanese Americans during WWII.

(WC: 500)

Bibliography

- “Arnold Maeda Obituary (1926 - 2020) - Los Angeles, CA - Los Angeles Times.” *Legacy.com*,
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- “Home - Venice JAMM.” *Venice JAMM*. <https://venicejamm.org/>