

Arnold Maeda Manzanar Pilgrimage Grant Essay by Jennifer Yamashita, 2025

I remember when I was about 10 years old, I went with my Girl Scout Troop to clean the VJAMM (1). At the time, I didn't fully understand the struggles of the Issei and Nissei that were forced into concentration camps, but I knew it had been hard. While we were cleaning, I saw Mr. Maeda arrive. To me, Mr. Maeda, was the across-the-street neighbor of my grandma. Someone who came over on Christmas Eve and sat at the end of the couch watching us grandchildren play. We all called him Mr. Arnold. Seeing him at the VJAMM surprised me. I didn't know he had anything to do with it. He was so excited to see us cleaning. After we finished, he thanked us and shared a story. He told us how heartbreaking it was to have to leave his dog behind when he was incarcerated. It was a side of Mr. Arnold I had never seen before, and it had a profound impact on me.

Years later, I sat thinking about what issue to address for my Girl Scout Gold Award project (2). I wanted to do a project that highlighted my appreciation for my local Japanese American (JA) community. I remembered Mr. Arnold's heartbreaking story about his dog. That story had helped me really grasp how difficult going to the concentration camps were for Japanese Americans, and I decided I wanted to share it with children to teach them about the struggles of our elders. Mr. Arnold inspired me to create an online interactive story that teaches children about various local JA historical sites and their significance while going on an adventure to reunite Mr. Arnold and his dog, Boy (although they were not reunited in real life).

Over the years I have continued to help clean the VJAMM and learn more about my JA community, including the struggles of Japanese Americans *after* they were released from the concentration camps. I learned about the Alien Land Laws(3) and how the Japanese Americans faced discrimination and were forced to buy houses in restrictive covenants(4) – which forced them to develop a strong community. The more I learned, the more appreciation I gained for my elders. I became dedicated to giving back to my community and upholding the traditions they started, such as the Obon festival and mochitsuki. I've been taught the secrets of making dango, tsukemono, and wonton. I look forward to learning more and helping carry on the traditions in the future.

Thinking back to how happy and enthusiastic Mr. Arnold was to see my troop clean the monument, I can only imagine how thrilled he'd be if I were to help with the Manzanar Pilgrimage. I want to ensure that the hard work he has done for the community is upheld and lasts for generations to come.

## Bibliography

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