

## The Sixth Annual Arnold Manzanar Pilgrimage Grant Essay

To stretch your wings and fly when they've been tied back for so long takes courage that is hard to come by, yet Manzanar incarcerated and community activist Arnold Maeda modelled that throughout his life. Despite being incarcerated at only fifteen, having to leave behind his life along with the other thousand persons of Japanese ancestry from Santa Monica, Venice, and Malibu for the barracks of Manzanar, Maeda was a force for change as a charter member of the Venice Japanese American Memorial Monument Committee<sup>1</sup>. Eventually the committee succeeded in having a memorial monument dedicated to mark the spot where "aliens and non-aliens" of Japanese ancestry were forced to line up, ensuring that the community does not forget the injustices that took place there<sup>2</sup>. Despite my growing up in San Jose, home of one of the last three remaining Japantowns in the U.S., I didn't see any fragments of incarceration in physical spaces like Japantown or in the spaces I occupied, like the dinner table at my grandma's for New Year's spam musubi making.

Like Maeda, my paternal grandparents were also incarcerated, in Poston and Tule Lake as toddlers, and like Brian Maeda, Arnold's brother, some of their siblings were also born in camp. I'm not sure how much of camp they remember though; my Grandpa, as well as most of his siblings, have passed on. As for my Grandma, I'm almost too afraid to ask for further details; talking about incarceration has never been my family's strong suit. I can sense tension in my family regarding incarceration, and I don't know how to discuss this facet of the Japanese American identity without stirring the pot. Instead of stories passed down to the next generation, many younger Japanese American families like mine have inherited a history of silence.

<sup>1</sup> 1. "Arnold Maeda Obituary (1926 - 2020) - Los Angeles, CA - Los Angeles Times," Legacy.com, November 6, 2020, <https://www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/latimes/name/arnold-maeda-obituary?id=7328582>.<sup>2</sup> 1. "Our Progress," Venice JAMM, January 17, 2026, <https://venicejamm.org/our-progress/>.

Like myself, I consider Maeda to be a theater kid (though it might be more accurate to say he was musically inclined). During his time in camp, Maeada performed songs that Lou Frizzell, the music and drama teacher in Manzanar, wrote for his students<sup>3</sup>. This reminds me of how I'll sometimes record myself practicing so I sound decent at karaoke socials with friends. It was refreshing to hear that Maeda, a well-respected figure within the Japanese American community, was once also a child with diverse interests like mine and a deep love for his dog Boy, a love immortalized on the monument for all time.

While Japanese Americans are not now being explicitly discriminated against, as they were before, during, and after World War II with their incarceration, prejudice has taken a new form – the disappearing of people, particularly those who are undocumented, by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), right off the streets and into detention centers without due process or regard for human rights and life. We are seeing history repeat itself, and as a community who has had elders live through it, we cannot sit by passively. I look forward to participating in the Manzanar Pilgrimage that honors the struggles our elders went through, while recognizing that similar evils are taking place in the world today and while standing in solidarity with our community.

WC: 488 +

<sup>3</sup> 1. "Songs from the Operetta 'Loud and Clear,'" California Revealed, accessed February 6, 2026, <https://californiarevealed.org/do/ad3fd418-a457-4aff-bc24-d9d31d3e3ce1>.

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