



Dignity's Advocate

Imagine the following call for legal help. Would you respond?

It's the mid-1990s, and the federal government has just determined that a large number of Americans may have been harmed by actions of the United States. Those people are now permitted to gather documents and other evidence to "make their case." If they are persuasive, they may be eligible to be compensated for their losses, which may be significant.

Oh, I failed to mention: The harm was done about 50 years ago.

Would you volunteer to build that legal case?

That was the situation facing the Arizona legal community just a few years after the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 was passed. That historic law recognized the **internment of Japanese Americans** as a mistake, and granted former internees an apology and financial compensation. (For more on the **law's anniversary**, see p. 60.)

But many Japanese Americans who were not imprisoned were still harmed by the creation of a mandatory exclusion program implemented in Arizona. As the U.S.


Department of Justice determined in 1994:

[A] termination of significant pre-existing and on-going business and personal activities in their daily lives in the exclusion zone amounted to losses of liberty or property. Specifically, these claimants suffered deprivations in business and personal activities, such as transfers to other schools, or substantial disruption of business or working arrangements, which might make them entitled to payments under the law.

The DOJ's acknowledgment came after the Asian Law Caucus in San Francisco petitioned for Japanese Americans whose lives and livelihoods had been ravaged by "zones of exclusion." Following that decision, the Arizona chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League put out the call. It may as well have read: "**Needed: Lawyers To Take on Some Half-Century-Old Cases.**"

The Arizona Asian American Bar stepped up. **Craig Fujii**, **Jim Park** and **Craig Kakuda** all decided that justice had been denied for too long. With the help of their paralegal, **Angie Bowen**, and a law student (now lawyer) **Eleanor Terpstra**, they performed all of the digging you might imagine was necessary. The cases were all fact-intensive. They spent hours and hours with claimants, in person and on the phone. A lot of the people they could have helped had already died, but there were survivors.

Craig Fujii recalls, "It was a matter of getting people in their 60s and 70s to remember small details from the 1940s. Fortunately," he adds with a laugh, "many of them have good memories."

Of course, these lawyers and others do not perform their service to garner public recognition. But, more than 10 years later, it may not hurt to pause, just for a moment, to remember and acknowledge. 



Tim Eigo



Poston, Arizona, in 1942

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