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Promoting Social Justice, Human Rights, and Peace

After Silence

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: This is a picture of me when I was about two. When we were sent to concentration camp, the order that was posted, the Exclusion Order No. 1 said we could only take what we could carry. I chose to take my rubber John Deere tractor. It had a tag because everybody had to have a tag--and a number.

MILES: After the bombing of Pearl Harbor the Japanese Americans, because they looked just like the enemy, were rounded up.

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: This is a photo of me as I'm walking down the dock. I'm this kid with the hood on and my sister Yuriko was hanging onto my hand.

MILES: Starting with Bainbridge Island, they were taken to interment camps, which is kind of a euphemism used by the government, they were actually more like concentration camps.

MIKAL: I heard that they locked up one hundred-ten thousand Japanese Americans. And I heard that two-thirds of them were citizens. They weren't treated like Americans, even the ones who were born in the US. They were treated like they were spies or something.

REBECCA: This obviously was a violation of Civil Rights, but because it was wartime the President was able to issue an Executive Order.

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: This is the Taylor Avenue site, this is where on March 30th of 1942 we were brought here by army trucks, marched down this long road, down to the ferry dock here--it's not here now--and it's a very important sight to us because this is the actual place we left Bainbridge Island--never to see the island again for at least three and a half years.

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: As we marched down that road, we were all in shock. We didn't know where we were going, we didn't know how long we would be gone and we didn't know if we'd ever come back.

REBECCA: We learned in psychology class that the first, you know, three or four years of a person's life are really formative years, so I wonder how that affected people who spent those first four years of their life in a concentration camp.

CALVIN: Well, he never got to know what his home was like. In fact, the concentration camp became sort of his home.

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: We spent over fifty years of our life trying to forget the events, trying to forget this sight, not wanting these painful memories to come back to us.

CALVIN: It seemed kind of strange to me, I guess. The fact that people could be removed from their home, people who had worked so hard to come to America, to live here, you know, merely because of their ethnic origin.

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: If you can't accept the fact that someone may treat you differently just because of the way you look, which doesn't seem possible because this is America, then you really get the feeling that you're inadequate.

AUDREY: I would imagine an unbelievable pain in the families after being told that they were spies and un-American; and being taken from their homes; and being told over and over that they are these horrible people, especially for the children. I would be afraid that they would start to believe that.

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: Because it's so painful, it's stuff that they've never talked about before, or talked about with their kids. They kept it inside themselves and were silent about it for fifty years.

AUDREY: I'm sure that that has a lot to do with the silence. This shame regarding their experience, that there must have been a reason that my government would take away my rights; maybe I am un-American. When these rights are infringed upon, it is very dangerous for the entire society. I think that that is probably the most damaging legacy of the entire interment experience in America.

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: This picture over here is the picture of the Nishinaka family, and my mother is over here in the corner. This is the house that my grandfather purchased in 1917 on Bainbridge Island. He actually moved to the island in about 1912 and went into logging and consequently lost most of his logs and had to quit that. Some of the people had stores and greenhouses, but most of the people had farms. And most of the crops before the war were strawberries. In those days, unless you were a citizen of the United States, you couldn't own property, it was kind of like a Catch-22, you couldn't become a citizen if you were Asian and you couldn't own land and you were chastised if you weren't a citizen. So in the case of buying our family property, my grandfather actually had it on contract with Capt. Olsen until my mother got old enough to own property, because she was born in Seattle in 1906.

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: This is a picture of me when I was about two. Life for the Japanese Americans, or people of Japanese descent, on Bainbridge Island before the war was one of where everyone felt like they were a community. Not only were

they getting along with their neighbors, but also were able to help each other and work together not only in work but also in play, and they were able to celebrate things and they had a good combination of the culture that they were in now, plus the cultures they brought with them when they came from Japan.

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: Work was hard. Sometimes you worked past daylight to get ahead, and as the Depression was ending they were finally able to make a profit, and that's when Pearl Harbor happened and World War II happened.

F.D.R. (on NEWSREEL): December 7, 1941, a date which will live in infamy.

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: When the bombs fell on Pearl Harbor, most people in the Japanese community were very shocked, they couldn't believe that, as one guy said, that Japan could be so stupid as to attack us. I don't think they realized what the impact of that really was, they thought of themselves as being American, not Japanese; but it was frightening. Well as for example, like with the World Trade Center, when the planes hit that I'm sure you probably were pretty frightened when that happened.

MILES: Well, I was kind of numb at the time. I did remember the sense of, "Oh my God, it can happen here."

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: Yeah.

MILES: I think that when you are afraid of something you shut it out, you don't want to think about it.

AUDREY: It is very easy to out-lash at either a minority or some other scapegoat.

MIKAL: The media played a humongous role in that, showing us as the Good Guys and then the people we were fighting as the Bad Guys.

NEWSREEL ANNOUNCER: First, let's examine a typical Japanese soldier. His average height is five feet, three inches. His average weight a-hundred-and-seventeen pounds. He and his brother soldiers are as much alike as photographic prints off the same negative.

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: In early February, the FBI did swoop down on the island and started arresting people.

REBECCA: Could your neighbors and friends really be spies, could they be trying to sabotage things with their cameras or lining their strawberry fields to point to Navy bases? I just can't believe that people could let their fear take control of them so completely.

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: My father was one of the ones that were arrested. The official reason is because they found a .22 rifle and dynamite in his barn, which is,

you know something all farmers had in those days. But my mother said the reason why she thought he was rounded up was because he commuted to Seattle everyday and when he did that he brought along things for the greenhouses along Rich Passage where all the Navy ships pass through. They had a good excuse for picking us. For one thing, Bainbridge Island was home to the Navy's top-secret radio communications station to the Pacific. We were a definite geographic area that they could just isolate off.

CALVIN: I guess fears define the boundaries of our societies, our cultures, our ideas and thoughts. But they can sometimes lead us to irrational behavior, lead us to things that we normally wouldn't do.

NEWSREEL: Notices were posted: All persons of Japanese descent were required to register.

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: This photo is a picture of the soldiers from New Jersey as they're posting the notice on March 24th. This is when we were removed from the island.

NEWSREEL ANNOUNCER: Neither the Army nor the War Relocation Authority relish the idea of taking men, women, and children from their homes, their shops and their farms. So the military and civilian agencies alike determine to do the job, as a democracy should, with real consideration for the people involved.

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: We had six days. It was posted on March 24th and we were removed on March 30th, and it said we had to register. We could only take what we could carry. And we were the test case, we were the first--they wouldn't call us a "test case," but we were the first group. I think the Army was real curious about what was going to happen, so they came with their fixed bayonets and so forth, and really clamped down on us. They put us on curfew.

AUDREY: If the Japanese community had protested sooner when the curfews were first being imposed, do you think it might have been different?

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: I personally don't think it would have been any different at all. Culturally that just didn't fit in. If you're a person of Japanese descent, you would really respect your first generation or Issei, in a lot of ways it was very belittling if you challenged authority. And that would be the same thing for our government. They felt that cooperating was one of the ways they could show that they were good Americans.

NEWSREEL ANNOUNCER: And the Japanese themselves cheerfully handled the enormous paperwork involved in the migration.

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: It made a lot of mixed feelings for people. People who felt that they shouldn't have to do this and were having to; people who thought sometimes things happen and you just can't help it.

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: What do you guys think, would you have protested in that situation?

CALVIN: I don't know; ½

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: What do you think? Would you have fought for your rights and said this is all wrong?

REBECCA: Well, part of me is inclined to feel that it's for national security--but it also makes me nervous because if for some reason I was in a group that was targeted, who would stand up for me if nobody stood up for others?

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: Walt Woodward, who was the editor of the paper, asked some of the younger men who were Nisseis to meet with him, and said to him, you know, you guys could be in trouble.

AUDREY: You know that not everyone is completely gung-ho about the interment, but yet there is only really one good example of Walt Woodward, of someone who would speak out against it.

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: Not only did he stand up for us and say that this is wrong, for us as American citizens to be sent away without any Due Process, but he took a big risk on his part in that he'd only owned The Review for maybe about a year.

AUDREY: The idea that he was threatened with the loss of his livelihood and his job is really shocking when in hindsight we think of him as a hero.

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: In fact he was the only newspaper editor in the whole United States who consistently made that stand.

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: You know a lot of this was not only because we looked like the enemy, but a lot of it was economic too. In California the Japanese farmers owned 10 per cent of the land but were producing 90 per cent of the products. Obviously somebody wanted them out of there. Bainbridge was different. Mostly because we were a small community and really tight knit, our kids went together to school and so forth.

CALVIN: Could you tell us about this one?

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: Yes Calvin, this is a photo of the ferry Kehloken. It was a Monday morning, about eleven o'clock when the ferry came in, it was kind of a gray day.

CALVIN: If I had six days to leave and I could only take what I could carry, I don't know ... I guess clothing would be the first thing. I'd want to carry things that would help me remember, carry things that would help me to record. I definitely would want to bring a journal.

AUDREY: ... Address books, so I could keep in touch.

MIKAL: I would take my Bible; it would help me to be able to forgive.

MILES: What I'd really want to take would be the people that I knew, and of course I couldn't have that.

REBECCA: I would hope that I could bring a dog or a cat with me because I'm really close to my pets, but I'm pretty sure that wouldn't be allowed.

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: Here are the Mojis, being taken by the soldiers. They were the family that had a dog that couldn't go with them, that wanted to go with them, and who died about a month later because it refused to eat because the Mojis weren't there any longer.

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: You could say things happen because of being afraid or because of suspicions, but at the same time you wonder when someone is going to take that step to say, "Well, maybe this isn't right."

MILES: I think that fear closes us off from each other.

REBECCA: And that's definitely what happened, because I think that the only way you can allow a hundred-thousand people to be taken from their homes with no real evidence or substantial reason to do so, you must be indifferent.

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: There are even papers in the National Archives that said people of Japanese decent were not a problem and they shouldn't be rounded up and that was ignored by the military.

CALVIN: Then again, after the war, not a single Asian American was convicted of treason or spying.

MILES: Well, you three are seniors, what would you think if you weren't allowed to graduate?

MIKAL: I'd be outraged if I couldn't graduate with my Senior Class because of a situation that I couldn't control, like the government taking me away.

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: The kids who were teens, it was really heartbreaking for them, they couldn't go through High School graduation. There were people that came down to see us off, that were classmates and I think it was a big risk on their

part to come down there. Would you have taken that risk to skip school and say goodbye to your friends?

MILES: I don't think I could have lived with myself if I hadn't.

MIKAL: I agree.

AUDREY: Weren't there a lot of examples of this sort of compassion that you see there?

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: Yes.

AUDREY: Since they were being ordered to do it.

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: Yes. Out of the forty-five families on the Island about thirteen of them didn't have heads of the family with them because they were arrested. The soldiers that were escorting us, a lot of them were carrying kids at the beginning and carrying suitcases for mothers because in some cases the fathers weren't there, like my father wasn't there. And the adults say a lot of the soldiers were crying when they loaded us up on the train to accompany us down to California, that they had tears in their eyes and were crying. And they said that the soldiers from New Jersey were just marvelous, they did everything they could to make us as comfortable as we could be, that they actually led the people in song as the train rolled down to California.

We had to pull the blinds down if we were going through a city. It took us two days to get down there. I do remember the clickety-clickety clicking noise and seeing telephone polls going swoop-swoop past the window, just passing the window like that; and I remember getting up on the buses and going into the desert where it got hotter and hotter. Kay Sakai at that time, Nakao now, said she saw these buildings out in the distance--these black-looking buildings--and she could see the heat waves coming off the roofs and how dusty it was there; and she said to herself, "Boy I'm glad that we're not going to a place like that," and the buses turned right into there and that's where we went.

AUDREY: Where is that?

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: I think that's Manzanar. Let me take a look.

AUDREY: That the camp that you were at?

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: Yes, the first one we went to. Yep, that's Manzanar. In the Owens Valley at the foot of Death Valley. It was so dusty there if you didn't keep your lips together your mouth would fill up with sand. The buildings were shacks actually, with tarpaper on the roofs and the walls with no insulation and in the wintertime it would get to zero degrees and in the summertime it would get to be

one hundred. I remember waking up in the morning and seeing the imprint of my body on the mattress because everything else was covered with sand.

NEWSREEL ANNOUNCER: The Army provided housing, and plenty of healthful, nourishing food for all.

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: People were so sick that the lines for the bathrooms, which were a separate building, were longer than the lines for the mess hall. My mother said one of the elderly Issei, or first-generation women said to her, "you know they are poisoning us, they're going to kill us off and we're all going to die one-by-one and we're never going to leave this place."

REBECCA: Well, do you think internment camps, in a tiny way, might have protected Japanese Americans from backlash?

CALVIN: No. It's saying that: "No matter what, you're always different from us, no matter what you do, and we cannot trust you."

REBBECA: Are these the soldiers of the camp?

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: All the camps had barbed-wire all the way around and soldiers with machineguns on the guard towers with searchlights. The searchlights and the machine guns were pointed in at us, they weren't pointed out to protect us.

CALVIN: For me, it conjured up images of the Holocaust. The fact that the Jews were interred by the Germans due to a kind of a racial fear--a hatred imbued into the people which obviously led to greater consequences. But nonetheless, in a minor way, I guess you could say the Japanese interment kind of was almost like a very small reflection of what went on in Europe.

REBECCA: You also have to find a scapegoat. If the people were angry or afraid, and saying why didn't their government know that this was going to happen--and so maybe they had to redirect that fear somehow.

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: I know there was one ten-year-old boy who chased after a baseball, and tried to crawl under the fence to get the baseball and was shot at. There was another man who was collecting scrap lumber and he was shot. And I think the biggest incident in Manzanar was because they got the wrong person in jail so all these men were protesting. Two men were killed and I think there were nine or eleven men that were wounded. And it turned out that the soldier who was manning the machine gun just panicked. You know, they were getting more and more frightened as the crowd became more unruly and the commanding officer was running around telling his men to be brave, you know, "Stand in there! Remember Pearl Harbor!" is what he was saying.

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: After being in concentration camp for a couple of weeks my sister Lilly said to my mother, you know, "How come we're here, how come we have to be here?" And my mother really puzzled about what to tell her, because she didn't really know how to explain it to her, so she just told Lilly that we were on vacation. Kay talks about one of the young girls saying to her mother, "Mommy when are we going to be going back home, when are we going to be going back to America?"

REBECCA: I think, when a majority fears a minority you need to rely on the Bill of Rights. If you can't rely on it when you need it most, then I don't know what it's there for.

REBECCA (reading): Dear Gene and Roy, This morning is Monday, and I went to the post office before eight o'clock and I had to wait in line for three full hours before I got our mail. Boy was I glad, it was worth it! I brought home twenty-eight letters from the Post Office. On Sunday we played softball-baseball against Los Angeles and we lost 5-4.

AUDREY (reading): Dear Gene, Hi'ya kid from good old California! Bet you didn't expect me to write did ya? I hear I am missing some sweet stuff in Algebra now; 1/2.

REBECCA: I was surprised by how normal everything seemed for the kids who were in concentration camp. They talked about playing baseball and playing with their friends, but they never really talked about, you know, being taken away from their homes. **DR. FRANK KITAMOTO:** Are the Japanese Americans bitter about this? Yes, maybe some people are; but in those days bitterness was not one of those things that was acceptable, so we internalized the pain. I think that the time in concentration camp did a lot to break up the traditional way we see families in the Japanese community. My father--I think interment really did affect him. He was a self-made person who was kind of a free-spirit. To all of a sudden be cut-off and accused of something that he felt like he didn't do, and to be taken away from his family, and to be in a lot of ways thought of as a criminal, or a bad person, by being imprisoned and being taken away by the FBI, I think that really did a lot. I think a lot of Japanese men in that situation would have become very quiet and very meek, but that wasn't his make up. It just made him mad.

NEWSREEL ANNOUNCER: The Americanism of the great majority of America's Japanese finds its highest expression in the thousands who are in the United States Army.

CALVIN: It seems kind of unusual that they lock you up with your family and then draft you into an army that put you there in the first place--you know what I mean?

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: Yes, in fact it's still something that they are struggling with to this day, sixty-two years after.

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: This is in Minidoka, in Southeast Idaho. This is my uniform.

I must have been big into uniforms in those days. We got a lot of stuff from Sears Roebuck--you couldn't walk out of the camp and go shopping in department stores.

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: The people from Bainbridge Island petitioned to be sent to Minadoka where the Seattle people were being sent. The conditions were not much better there. I think the parents tried to make it as normal as they could: they had canteens; the teenagers had dances; they did the best they could to make things better.

NEWSREEL ANNOUNCER: Nissei hear President Truman's tribute.

PRES. HARRY S. TRUMAN: You fought not only the enemy, but you fought prejudice.

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: When they closed the camps they said, "Here's twenty-five dollars, find your own way home." My dad decided to come back to Bainbridge Island to check out the climate--it wasn't the weather, it was to see if it was safe to come home. When he came back to the Island he was on the ferry with people he had commuted with, and he said some of the people would say, "Hi Frank, it's good to see you back," and he said there were other people who would just turn their back on him and refuse to talk to him. He said Mrs. Williams, who was a neighbor of ours, tagged along with him to keep him out of trouble and make sure no one harassed him.

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: My father, I used to not feel very close to. He was gone while I was in my formative years. Whenever I'd see an adult who knew me in concentration camp the first thing they'd say to me was, "You were that little kid who was always hanging on your mother's dress and was crying all the time!" And that's the way they remember me, and that might have been because my father was gone, I don't have the slightest idea. But he died in 1967, which is a lot sooner than I got interested in Japanese American History. He was gruff and had a bad temper; but I know, when I think back on him now, that I wish I had spent more time with him and knew him better. And I hope when he died that he knew how important I thought he was to me.

MILES: How many of the people came back?

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: About half of us came back.

MILES: I imagine it was very emotionally charged.

MIKAL: Trying to come back here with people who had shown a lot of distrust towards them.

AUDREY: I don't think that the problem would be resolved with that much anger in the society and I think that's why the whole internment issue was pushed under the carpet for decades.

REBECCA: Did you ever talk about the experience when you came back with your neighbors who stayed behind?

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: No, I think everybody tried really hard to gloss over it and hide from it and not talk about it at all. There are still families whose kids have not heard about this at all. When you get something done to you that's so painful you're really frightened about bringing it up again. One of the things that I remember distinctly about going to school here on the island is that it was never talked about as far as the role that the Japanese played in the development of the island. In fact, almost all the land had been cleared by Japanese American farmers because I know that we've been on the island since 1883. I remember back in the Sixties the Strawberry Festival Committee approached us about having a Japanese American Float in the parade and it really hit me when they said, "Well of course we'll have our own float too and we'll call our float The Pioneers, but yours will be the Japanese American Community float." My immediate thought was: "What does a '½Pioneer' mean? Does it mean you have to be White to be a '½Pioneer'?" Over a ten-year period of time we finally got to a point where things had changed and people were more comfortable talking about this--although we still have people in the community who refuse to talk about it and refused to be interviewed.

MILES: So do you think that silence was harmful in the long run?

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: I think it's harmful not only to ourselves, but it's also harmful for the community at large because it's real easy to forget that something like this happened.

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: So why is this memorial so important, will it bring healing to some of us? Yes. Is it to embarrass our government or to make people feel guilty or ashamed? Of course not, that doesn't make sense. The reason we went to concentration camp is because we were thought of as a collective--we looked like the enemy. And why should that happen to anybody? Why should we do that to the Government or to anybody else?

GOV. GARY LOCKE: We resolve to right history's wrongs by shining a light on the injustices of the past.

AUDREY: When a citizen is faced with an injustice, any kind of injustice, not necessarily the internment of an entire race of people, but even the small things, it has to start somewhere.

CALVIN: We need people to think, we need people to doubt, to question.

MILES: If we trade our individual civil rights for security, our own government becomes more of a threat to us.

US REP. JAY INSLEE: The Woodward lesson, and the lesson of this memorial, is that it's most patriotic to dissent and question what your Federal Government is doing--that is the healthiest thing you can do.

DR. FRANK KITAMOTO: Sometimes the one voice that may be different allows somebody else to say something.

It's been said, "The opposite of love is hate." Really, the opposite of love is not hate--it's fear. It takes a very special person to take that risk.