

JOURNEY TO JUSTICE

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From a displaced family released from a wartime relocation camp to the California State Assembly, the author traces her journey to justice by way of social work.

The road began in the 1950s in a Denver, Colorado neighborhood known as the “Five Points.” Google it and you will understand how it became known as the “Harlem of the West.” Here is where my father moved our pre-war family of five—a block from the housing projects—after four harsh years behind barbed wire in a Japanese American wartime relocation camp called Manzanar.

I was the “oops” fourth child, born into a family struggling to re-establish itself after losing everything: a produce business in Los Angeles, our home, car, personal dignity and freedom during World War II. Little did I know that the bitter inheritance of the internment experience would propel my journey to a lifelong commitment to social justice.

My earliest memories are of my neighbors: La Senora Martinez who, despite being blind from untreated diabetes, could whip up the most delicious *tortillas de harina* (white flour tortillas) I’ve ever had; Miss Virgie, an elderly African American woman whose gnarled hands surely had their own story; the Eto Family, Peruvian Japanese also forcibly relocated to U.S. internment camps, whose son was deaf after a freak head injury; and the Teshimas, owners of a *shoyu* (soy sauce) factory, which they opened during the war years when trade with Japan had been cut.

When starting over my father, who had an eighth grade education, first took a job as a dishwasher at Denver’s famous Brown Palace Hotel. He would bring castoff food home for the family from the dinner plates brought to

him for cleaning. No Electronic Benefit Transfer programs back then.

For a short time, he worked at Mr. Teshima’s soy sauce factory, but eventually opened his own business as the proverbial Japanese gardener. Most of his workers were Mexican. Before long, my father had three crews. He made another former internee, Mr. Matsunaga, his foreman, and developed a customer base of over 200. During the summer, I would accompany him across Colorado Boulevard—the dividing line—to help tend to the gardens of the wealthy.

Even then I could clearly see the disparities between neighborhoods. Although I didn’t really understand why these differences existed, something just didn’t feel right.

During elementary school, one of my nicknames was “Lemon Drop.” Sometimes I was known as the “highest yellow” in the group. I also remember a freckled red-head named Susan Heath, whose family was poorer than ours. She was a frequent target on the playground; I would always try to stand up for her.

My siblings were already in high school. I recall one evening of particular household excitement when one of my sister’s was picked up by her date to the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) Ball. He was tall, handsome, and crisply dressed in military regalia. My sister looked like a princess to me. A few hours later, the calls started coming in to our old black rotary telephone. Words were exchanged in Japanese; I could sense the tension, but could not understand the language. My sister’s date was African American.

I understand now that my father and mother, who today would have been 107 and 96, respectively, were way ahead of their time. For my sister to date interracially in 1957 with my parents' blessing put us at odds with other Japanese Americans. My parents considered it a non-issue, saying there were only two kinds of people in the world: good and bad.

But there were other issues in our family. As the years passed, my older siblings left for college, got married, moved away, and my mother's mental health deteriorated. Today, I believe she would have been diagnosed with untreated post-partum depression, exacerbated by the relocation experience. Perhaps she had a form of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. There were afternoons when I would find her in a darkened room, sitting in the same position she had been in when I first left for school in the morning. At other times, she would be greatly agitated.

When I left for undergraduate school at the University of Colorado, Boulder, as a Regent's Scholar, I had decided that I would pursue a degree in Psychology because I wanted to "save my family." In the meantime, the decades of gardening and manual labor had taken its toll on my father. After falling from a ladder trimming a customer's tree, his spine was crushed.

Shortly thereafter, his years of smoking also caught up with him. He was diagnosed with cancer that quickly metastasized throughout his body and brain. Within a few weeks, he was gone. I was 18. And as the youngest child and the only one left at home, I was responsible for my mother.

In 1972, my senior year in college, I was selected as a delegate to attend what was billed as the "First Asian American Mental Health Conference" ever held in the United States, which was underwritten by the National Institute of Mental Health. Asian Americans from all parts of the country and as far away as Guam and Samoa gathered in San Francisco. As the sole Colorado delegate (apportioned by state Asian Pacific Islander population), I decided to go straight to the conference chair to find out how this meeting arose. The organizers of this meeting were social workers from Los Angeles, including

one referred to as "the Godfather," George M. Nishinaka, who encouraged me to apply to the social work graduate programs at UCLA and USC.

The rest is history. I was accepted as a Trojan and completed my MSW at USC in 1974. While there, I advocated for and established the first legislative field work placement in the school's history. Today, social work graduate students are regularly placed in legislative offices.

My specialization in political social work led to my being hired as an Assistant Deputy County Supervisor to longtime liberal Los Angeles County Supervisor Edmund D. Edelman. While there I worked on health, human services, Asian American, and women's issues. In 1977, I left Los Angeles and joined the Washington, D.C. national outreach campaign during the 1980 Census. I later worked as a civil rights investigator for the U.S. Department of Commerce.

Marriage and the birth of two children brought our family back to California, where my husband, Janlee Wong (current Executive Director of NASW California) had his roots. We relocated first to San Francisco, then to San Diego, and then in 1995 to the bicycle-friendly, liberal enclave of Davis, California, home to UC Davis. Remember the Allan Bakke case that went to the Supreme Court regarding reverse discrimination?

My early involvement as a parent in our local school district and my volunteer work in a variety of Democratic Party and other issue-based campaigns landed me another stint as a County Supervisor's Deputy. Once again I accepted a position with a leading liberal on the local Yolo County Board of Supervisors, Dave Rosenberg. When Rosenberg vacated his post to become a Yolo County Superior Court Judge, then-Governor Gray Davis appointed me to serve out the 13-month balance of his term.

Subsequently, I ran for and won a four-year term in my own right as District Four Yolo County Supervisor. As a social worker, I truly enjoyed working at the county level where, for me, social work policy meets the people.

Legislative terms limits opened an Assembly seat considered strong Democratic

heading into a June 2008 Primary. Running for a seat in the Legislature was not anything that I had planned to do. Such races are somewhat formulaic, with pundits, pollsters, and fundraisers making bets as to winners and losers. In fact, there exists an actual tome called *The Target Book*, that (for a fee, of course) will provide you with the latest in electoral predictions (see this site at <http://www.californiatargetbook.com/>)

I am reasonably certain I was nowhere in *The Target Book* when I put my hat-in-the-ring to run for an open seat against a well-funded, well-connected, and “heir apparent” candidate in the 8th Assembly District in northern California. “Mariko Yamada” —who is that?

Ultimately, my race became *the* most expensive state assembly primary race in the State in 2008. I ran against the “establishment” Democratic candidate who had run in 2002 and lost. As mayor of one of the ten cities in the district, he had established himself in the intervening years as a talented and articulate leader in the greater Sacramento area, a prodigious fundraiser, and a capitol insider. He came to my home town of Davis to announce his intention to run for the open seat a full eighteen months before the Primary surrounded by area elected officials and power brokers. He had a beginning campaign war chest of almost half-a-million dollars and almost every endorsement in the region. Surely, no one would dare run against him.

Although I was outspent two-to-one, through good old-fashioned social work

community organizing, the help of legendary political consultant Bill Cavala (who passed away in December 2009), a grassroots “small donor” fundraising strategy, the incalculable value of boots-on-the-ground efforts in the final six weeks of the campaign (not to mention my own efforts at personally walking to 4,500 households in the district) we defeated our opponent by 3 ½ percentage points on June 3, 2008.

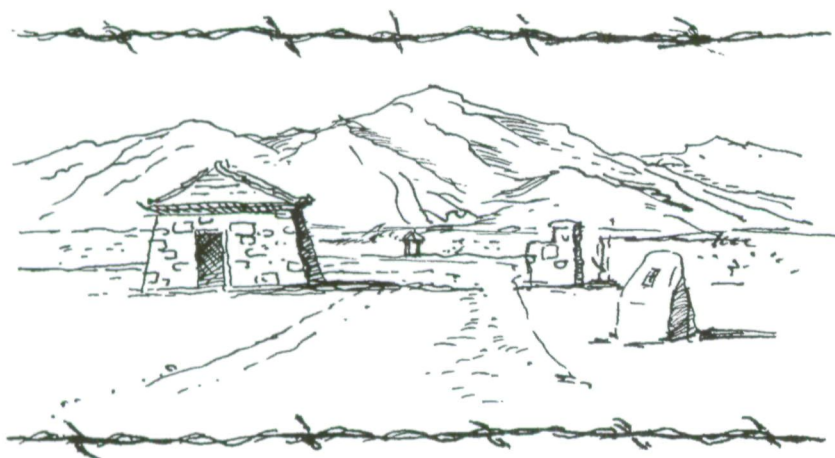
Why did I choose to run when I had only \$10,000 in the bank, no pre-planned intent to seek an Assembly seat, and virtually no support from the local establishment? Frankly, because I did not want to be represented by someone whom I felt was a handpicked “heir apparent” who, although a Democrat, did not hold the same priorities as I did with respect to the mission of the social work profession: to work on behalf of those most vulnerable in our society.

I am now running for my second term during a time of unprecedented global environmental disaster, continuing high unemployment in a stagnant economy, drastic reductions in education, health, and social services spending, and increases in our jail and prison populations.

Social work has its roots in the horrific times addressed in the settlement house movement by Jane Addams—the “Mother of Social Work”—and refined in case management practice propelled by our other matriarch, Mary Richmond. Social workers specialize in taking on society’s toughest problems, and seeking to help individuals as well as change the environmental forces giving rise to children, families, and adults with compelling health, mental health, economic, and other needs.

From the Five Points to the California State Capitol, seems my journey to justice has just begun.

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