

Testimony in support of SCR #14, Salem, Oregon

Rev. Barbara Bellus Monday, February 13, 2017

It is an honor to speak today in support of this important Resolution, in solidarity with the voices of living survivors of the grave injustices of 75 years ago. The testimony of Homer Yasui, age 92, who was 17 at the time of the relocation and incarceration, touches us deeply with its clarity and eloquence. How fortunate and salutary to have his and other witnesses' voices, in our Hearing this day.

I speak today as one who has had the gift of thirty years of connection with the Yasui family of Hood River, as pastor, friend, ally through the final difficult and exhilarating process of Redress, and historian of the legal case and activist leadership of Min Yasui. I first met Mr. Yasui in the summer of 1986. New to my parish, I was presiding at a Yasui family funeral. I came to know his story: a few months later, Min passed away at the age of 70. Clearly, I would never be the same. I learned at a cellular level what had happened to this family, to the Japanese American community, and what a key courageous and proactive figure Min Yasui was: I came to know his remarkable story by heart.

I stepped out of parish ministry to research and write a Ph. D. dissertation at U of Oregon about Min's legal challenge, coram nobis case, and Redress leadership. I have experienced both historically personally and how deeply "our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor" are tied together in a commonwealth of conviction. What threatens one of us threatens us all: our democracy relies at the most basic human level on our care and concern for the common good: this is our sacred trust. "*Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.*" (Martin Luther King, Jr)

Our bold national experiment in independence, human rights, and in self-government by election of leaders in a constitutional democracy with limited powers of government, three separate branches, and checks and balances, strong protections of personal liberty, is 240 years old. It requires constant vigilance to sustain. I can only hope and trust that at this moment in our history, we will be sobered by recalling our severe mistakes 75 years ago, and heartened by the success of Redress, with the Civil Liberties Act of 1988. With great effort and powerful testimony and research by the CWRIC, the bipartisan commission concluded that the incarceration was not brought about by military necessity, but by long standing racial prejudice, wartime hysteria, and failure of political leadership.

No one wanted this story to be known and learned from more than Min Yasui. The last thing that Min said to me, after a lengthy conversation at his Aunt's funeral dinner, was, "***Pastor, I simply will not believe that justice will not be done.***" Indeed. ***Gambatte.*** Persevere. With the full force of his sturdy unvanquished conviction, he gave himself the perfect unforgettable exit line, just a few months before he passed. Min Yasui died in mid-stride: he never let up, never gave up. Earlier that same day, in August 1986, the first thing he said to me as we stood at Idylwild Cemetery at his Aunt's grave, was. "*Pastor, when my time comes, I want to be buried here. You can see the mountain from here. And even when you can't see it, you know it's there.*" The subtitle of my dissertation is "You Can See the Mountain From Here", in tribute to his vision. The title of a book in process comes from the text on the Presidential Medal of Freedom awarded to Yasui in 2015, extolling the "power of one voice echoing for justice."

I thank you for the opportunity to speak from my life and my heart, in support of this resolution and our common responsibility to be vigilant in the defense of the liberty of all. Min said, realizing that he might not live to see Redress for which he had fought so long and so hard, *“ I have sat in the shade of trees I did not plant, and it behooves me to plant trees in whose shade I will never sit.”* My fellow Oregonians, he and others planted trees of renewed awareness of constitutional protections, not only for Redress for one community, but to say, *“Never Again”* - to Anyone! In his memory, in honor of internees and veterans, in service of a nation worthy of his sacrifice, let us sit in and protect that shade of equal rights, like the cedar trees of the heights of Hood River, where Min has gone home: his stone reads ***“Justice for All”***.

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On a stone dedicated at the Hood River library. given on the Centennial of his birth (October 19, 2016) are the words his father Masuo taught all his children, and they have passed on, *“You were born into this world for a purpose, to make it a better place.”*

When we really hear each other’s stories, something happens. Doors open, minds and hearts open, for good. We realize anew in today’s hearing what peril the Nikkei community was in, and what injustice was perpetrated, abandoning all due process, losing at home the very liberties that we were fighting for, and for whom so many suffered and died.

#### **Summary of Resolution 14**

**I strongly support this Resolution - that we remember what happened 75 years ago, to Americans of Japanese ancestry, that we learn from this admitted mistake in our national past, and that we are mindful going forward to be vigilant in protecting the civil rights of all Americans, of whatever ethnicity, religion, or national origin.**