

Photographer Mario Reyes Dead at 69

Recently retired *Rafu Shimpo* staffer spent decades documenting Los Angeles' Japanese American community.

(Editor's note: A longer version of the following article originally appeared in the *Rafu Shimpo* and is reprinted with permission.)

Mario Gershom Reyes, whose photographs painted a collective portrait of generations of Angelenos, died Jan. 23 at his home in Boyle Heights after a brief battle with cancer.

In his 40 years of service at the *Rafu Shimpo*, Reyes faithfully documented anything and everything happening in and around the Nikkei community. He photographed the ordinary happenings of everyday life – kids' basketball, community picnics, 100th birthdays – as well as history-changing events and world leaders – the 1992 L.A. riots, President Barack Obama, the emperor of Japan and the Covid pandemic.

Rafu columnist Sharon Yamato described Reyes as “a gentle giant whose camera spoke louder than he ever did. His face didn't show it, but you felt his love for our community deep inside.”

Born in Mexico City, his family relocated to Los Angeles before he entered grade school. After settling in East L.A., he attended Riggin Elementary and graduated from Roosevelt High School. It was then that his love of photography intersected with his first experiences within the Japanese American community.

Taking pictures at the Nisei Week Grand Parade in 1971, 15-year-old Mario snapped a shot of dancer Janice Aiso and instantly fell in love with the grace and beauty of the art and tradition.

Almost 40 years later, he was again on First Street photographing Janice, but by then she was known as classical Japanese dancer and instructor Sumako Azuma II, leading the parade as the official choreographer.

Just as he had done for Sumako, Reyes was there to chronicle the ongoing history of Little Tokyo and the Japanese American community.

Nisei Week shared a special place in Reyes' heart, along with one group in particular: those Japanese Americans imprisoned by the U.S. no reason other than their race. Year

after year, his photos brought the people, sights and evolution of the annual Manzanar Pilgrimage to readers unable to attend in person.

Much of his work was in conjunction with the writing of the late journalist Martha Nakagawa (*Aug. 11-24, 2023 Pacific Citizen*, tinyurl.com/yc3mk9y9), his closest and dearest partner. The pair tackled some of the toughest historical issues of the war, and the effects that lingered years later, on groups that included those Japanese Americans who refused to serve in the U.S. military after being drafted while imprisoned.

Tall and well-mannered, Reyes could be unassuming but always made sure that those he loved knew it without question.

Former *Rafu* graphic designer Ayame Kousaka found a generous mentor and photo instructor in Reyes. For his 69th birthday on Jan. 19, she visited his home with a cake and card.

“Thank you for taking the time to teach me so many lessons behind the camera and in life,” she wrote. Bedridden and unable to read it himself, he managed a gentle smile upon hearing her words.

L.A. Dodgers team photographer Jon SooHoo remembered Reyes as calm and professional amongst the throngs of media that can often become unruly.

“In my world of photographers coming to Dodger Stadium to photograph games and events, I could always count on Mario to be laid back and chill while he was on assignment for the *Rafu*,” he wrote.

For his contributions to the Nikkei community and Greater Los Angeles, Reyes received honors from Nisei Week, the Pacific Southwest District of the Japanese American Citizens League (*Nov. 22-Dec. 5, 2019, Pacific Citizen* tinyurl.com/yzy5vmmx), and during his retirement party last May, citations from the city of Los Angeles and the California Legislature.

As much as anyone in the Little Tokyo community for the last several decades, Reyes' love, and dedication made him a fixture within the Japanese American community.



Mario Gershom Reyes displays the certificates he received in recognition of his photojournalism at his retirement party.

PHOTO: J. K. YAMAMOTO

A retrospective of his photos that opened last month at the Japanese American National Museum drew hundreds on its inaugural night. “Obras de Luz” represents the history of a community through his lens. Dozens of community leaders attended the opening, hoping to see Reyes, but unfortunately, he was unable to attend.

Bill Watanabe, founder and former

executive director of the Little Tokyo Service Center, said Reyes' passing is a loss for an entire community.

“Mario's lifelong work as a photographer helped the Nikkei community to see and remember its history, culture and community spirit, and that is how Mario will be remembered as well,” Watanabe said. “For generations to come, people will



JANM Board of Trustees Chair William Fujioka holds aloft a photo of Mario Reyes at the Dec. 6 exhibition of selected works shot by the *Rafu Shimpo* photojournalist.

PHOTO: GEORGE TOSHIO JOHNSTON

see Mario's work and not only remember what he chronicled but will remember Mario himself. He left a big part of himself to each of us.”

A celebration of life will be held on Feb. 15 at 11 a.m. at SGI-USA El Monte Buddhist Center, 3401 Rio Hondo Ave., Suite 168, El Monte. Reyes requested no flowers or koden.

— Mikey Hirano Culross, *Rafu Shimpo* staff writer

Karl Nobuyuki Dies

Sansei held national executive director title from 1977-80.

By George Toshio Johnston, Senior Editor

Karl Katsu Nobuyuki, a Sansei who served as JACL national executive director in the late 1970s, died Oct. 5, 2024, in Concord, Calif. He was 79.

The youngest of four children, with twin brothers Kenneth and Kevin and sister Karen preceding him in birth order, Karl Nobuyuki was the last surviving sibling. He was born May 20, 1945, at the Gila River War Relocation Authority Center.

After camp, from kindergarten through eighth grade, Nobuyuki attended Maryknoll School near Little Tokyo. Classmates Kyoko Nancy Oda and J.D. Hokoyama shared with *Pacific Citizen* their recollections of

Nobuyuki. “We rode the same bus every day, and we picked him and his brothers up and got to school,” said Oda, who also recalled that he “loved speech and debate” and had won many awards in that area. She also noted that Nobuyuki had earned a *yodan* in kendo.

Hokoyama, JACL's associate national director (and later, acting national director) during Nobuyuki's tenure as national executive director, recalled how Nobuyuki, despite his small stature, played center on the football team of Bishop Mora Salesian High School.

“He would get beat up in every game. Most teams put in the biggest guy they have in the center position,” Hokoyama said, “but he was tough. He was really tough.”

To longtime JACL members, Nobuyuki's name is probably best known because of his tenure as the organization's national executive director from May 1977 until the summer of 1980. Ron Ikejiri, who served as JACL's Washington representative from 1978-84, noted that this was a period of “transition of leadership from the Nisei to the Sansei, and the Nisei were not ready to pass the torch to the Sansei.”

After graduating from the



Karl Nobuyuki

PHOTO: FACEBOOK

University of Southern California in 1971 with a bachelor's degree in speech communication and rhetoric and prior to joining JACL, Nobuyuki was involved with Asian American Drug Abuse Program in its early years, having co-founded a self-help drug abuse program, Go for Broke Inc., in East Los Angeles. Later, he was the youth director for the city of Gardena's Municipal Activities Center.

Nobuyuki was predeceased by his second wife, Sandra. He is survived by his sons, Craig and Bryan; and his first wife, Hiromi. He is also survived by many other relatives. A celebration of life is planned for Feb. 22.

(Note: A longer version of this article is at tinyurl.com/4tn289py.)

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