

In MEMORIAM

Kanji Sahara Dies; Envisioned Camp Memorial Wall

JACLER of the Biennium awardee was active in SoCal JA community.

By P.C. Staff

Dr. Kanji Sahara, a rocket scientist who post-retirement became a Japanese American community activist and in recent years was particularly active in advocating for the creation of a World War II Camp Wall at Columbia Park in Torrance, Calif., died Feb. 15. He was 90.

The Japanese American Citizens League honored Sahara with its JACLER of the Biennium award in 2018. The recognition is given to a member who has "contributed the most to the strength and growth of the JACL" during a particular biennium. He was also a Nisei Week Pioneer Award recipient in 2023.

Sahara's Japanese American community activities included serving as president of the East San Gabriel Valley Japanese Community Center and as president of both the San Gabriel Valley JACL and the Greater Los Angeles JACL.

He was also a member of West Covina Taiko and Anglers Fishing, as well as a charter member of the Japanese American National Museum, where he had also served as a docent. Sahara was also a member of the Manzanar Committee and a regular attendee of Los Angeles Day of Remembrance and participated in the annual camp roll call that recognized those who had been held in the several government-run incarceration centers. He represented the Jerome War Relocation Authority Center in the 2024 Day of Remembrance ceremony.

In addition to being active with the Historic Wintersburg Preservation Task Force, Sahara was also on the board of the Tuna Canyon Detention Station



Kanji Sahara (left) is presented with the 2018 JACLER of the Biennium award from JACL National President Gary Mayeda.

PHOTO: GIL ASAKAWA

Coalition. Much of Sahara's recent Japanese American community activity was focused the World War II Camp Wall, set to open in early 2026.

The wall is envisioned to contain the tens of thousands of names of all ethnic Japanese, most of whom were U.S. citizens, who were, after the forced evacuation from the West Coast, incarcerated in several government-run centers that resulted after President Roosevelt inked Executive Order 9066 on Feb. 19, 1942 (see Feb. 4, 2022, *Pacific Citizen*).

"Kanji was a real visionary," his friend Nancy Hayata, president of the WWII Camp Wall Committee, said to the *Pacific Citizen*. It was a reference to the role Sahara had in what eventually became the plan to build the memorial wall in Torrance. Going back to his involvement with the Tuna Canyon Detention Station Coalition, with which he served as vice president, Hayata said, "There was a point where Tuna Canyon [Detention Station Coalition] thought that they might be able to purchase land where

Tuna Canyon was. There were talks of what we were going to put there, and the board decided it'd be really nice to put in a peace park.

"The project actually started out with him wanting to list all the names of everyone that was in Tuna Canyon at the peace park. Then he said, 'You know, we should have a wall for all of the camps and list everybody's name there.'

"When it turned out we couldn't, or didn't get the land at Tuna Canyon, Kanji's concept didn't die. He felt he came up with a really great idea, and he flew with it."

It could be said that Sahara's journey to conceptualizing the camp wall began with the advent of World War II, when he was a child who was incarcerated with his family. Similar to the thousands of families and individuals of Japanese ancestry living along the West Coast that the federal government forcibly removed to assembly centers, then to the various camps, the Saharas were moved to the racetrack at Santa Anita in California, then to the

two War Relocation Authority centers at Jerome and Rohwer in Arkansas.

The son of Shosaku and Aya-ko Sahara, Kanji Sahara was himself born in Hiroshima, Japan, on April 4, 1934, when his mother and older sisters, Mariko, Sumire and Toshiko, went to visit an ailing relative. He was six months old when they returned to Los Angeles, and he grew up in what was then known as Uptown, which is in between the Pico-Union neighborhood and Koreatown.

After camp, the Saharas moved to Chicago. Kanji Sahara graduated from high school in 1952, the same year he became a naturalized U.S. citizen. In an oral history interview with Densho, he said, "The McCarran Act allowed the Japanese to become citizens. So right away, I did that. And then my father did that too, he became a citizen. ... So now I could apply for a job that required security clearance."

Before that, however, he needed to enroll in and complete his post-high school education. Sahara graduated with a bachelor of science in electrical engineering from the Illinois Institute of Technology. His career in the defense industry took him first to New York, where he worked for Sperry Gyroscope Co. He told Densho: "I think I worked at Sperry Gyroscope for about a year and a half, and meanwhile I was going to night school at nighttime, and it was sort of getting hectic. But I thought I should go full time. So that's when I decided to quit work and come back to Chicago and go to Northwestern."

Sahara subsequently earned his Ph.D. from Northwestern University and later worked for General Dynamics' missile systems. Because of industry consolidation, Hughes bought General Dynamics, after which Tucson, Ariz.-based Raytheon became the owner — where he and his wife, Jane, lived from 1994-98, before he retired and moved to Southern California.

Mitch Matsumura, president of the Greater Los Angeles JACL and member of the P.C.'s Editorial Board, said, "Kanji will always be remembered by

the countless organizations he tirelessly supported."

Hayata said, "It is with honor and respect that the World War II Camp Wall nonprofit board carries on the dream of Kanji Sahara. We feel the loss of his presence and leadership. ... He leaves the world a better place in his efforts to teach about this incident in history, and that it must never happen again."

"On behalf of the residents of the city of Torrance, we are saddened to hear of Dr. Sahara's passing," said Torrance City Councilmember Jon Kaji. "We are committed to ensuring that his vision for the World War II Camp Wall becomes a reminder that the civil rights of all people must be protected."

Tuna Canyon Detention Station Coalition President Nancy Oda said, "Kanji's bright light will shine forever." In a statement, the TCDSC said it is "deeply saddened by the passing of Kanji Sahara, former vice president, community activist and visionary extraordinaire. A key figure in keeping the history of World War II's incarceration alive, it was his passion to expand the mission of the TCDSC to highlight the detention of persons of Japanese, German and Italian descent and to prevent injustice of any kind. This passion has been indelibly stamped upon all who knew him."

"Kanji worked tirelessly to ensure that the incarceration story is never forgotten and serves as a warning of what happens when its lessons are ignored. A deeply loved and revered member of the JANM family, his knowledge and dedication to connecting this history to the present and shaping the future will be profoundly missed," said JANM President and CEO Ann Burroughs.

Sahara was predeceased by his wife, Jane. He is survived by their children, Richard (Lydia) Sahara and Judy (Ben) Tang, five grandchildren, sister, Toshiko Sahara, and other relatives.

At press time, a memorial service for Sahara had been planned for March 8 at Faith United Methodist Church in Torrance, Calif. ■

Adachi, Shunji, 91, Honolulu, HI, Nov. 9, 2024.

Kohara, Setsuko, 94, Garden Grove, CA, Jan. 19.

Furuichi, Satoko, 86, San Francisco, CA, Feb. 9.

Murakami, Paula Kaye, 75, Spokane, WA, Feb. 4.

Hayashi, Beverly Anne, 75, Kent, WA, Jan. 24.

Shigenaga, Dale, 77, Las Vegas, NV, Feb. 13.

Iwatsubo, Sophia Okamoto, 100, Richmond, VA, Nov. 1, 2024.

Yamada, David R., 88, Montebello, CA, Jan. 6. ■

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