

Grayce and Hiro Uyehara: In Memoriam

Medford, New Jersey

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It was a great privilege for me – among the greatest in my life -- to have known and worked with Grayce and Hiro Uyehara.

In our time together, I would sometimes say – Hiro, to me you are a hero. And Grayce would say -- Oh, Grant, you are so clever with words. A real wit. Hiro, you say, is a hero. But the fact was – and the fact is – that Hiro and Grayce were heroes to me.

Hiro Uyehara was a precise, learned man having mastered some of the most difficult and obscure Kanji characters in the Japanese written language. And as we all know, he had the smile of a complete gentleman and scholar.

As husband and wife, Hiro and Grayce were at least fifty years ahead of their time. Grayce was a national Japanese

American leader, and as she travelled the country, Hiro was often with her, playing a gracious supporting role. Both were only a generation removed from the cultural norms of traditional Japan.

Remarkable, really, because as they worked together, no one sensed any kind of role reversal – all seemed perfectly ordinary.

We know, of course, that Grayce was among the most consequential Japanese Americans in Japanese American history. She was, in fact, the moral and political epicenter of Japanese American redress. Where ever she was – Washington, Los Angeles, or Boise – that's where redress was.

Grayce was a charismatic leader – always upbeat, even cheerful -- but she spoke in plain words. Thanks to Grayce in Washington's JACL office, all the redress trains ran on time. She made sure that everyone – including Nikkei members of Congress – did what they were supposed to do when they were supposed to do it.

There absolutely would have been no redress without her and the trust that our community had in her. All of us knew that Grayce was totally *issho kenmai* – Japanese for all in, full throttle. and non-stop.

Two stories about Grayce. It was the summer of 1985, and I was a month late producing a 700-word strategy paper for LEC, the lobbying arm of JACL. Grayce called me in New York, and said, “Why not come down to Philadelphia for a day? Maybe a change of scene will help.”

The Uyeharas picked me up at the train station about 3:00 in the afternoon. When we got to their house around 4:00, Grayce showed me the guest room that had a desk, a typewriter, and some paper. Before she shut the door, she said, “If you expect to have dinner, don’t come out until you’re finished.” I emerged at 7:30 and had a nice dinner.

As for Grayce, our moral leader. We needed one because what we had was not just the politics of exclusion and imprisonment, but an innocent people against an immoral

government. I think Grayce's sense of the moral – how we should live – drew much from her Japanese heritage.

In 1985, at the JACL National Convention in Chicago, I was 43 years, and felt that I had no more to learn about how to live life. I was wrong.

After the fierce mud-wrestling at the Convention, all of the so-called Redress faction candidates were elected over all of the so-called Japan Trade faction candidates, except one.

The Sansei man who lost was utterly humiliated. He, Grayce, and I were standing by a hotel elevator after the votes were counted. The Sansei said he was not going to the Sayonara closing event, but was going to his room and staying there.

Grayce said: "Yes, go up to your room. Then shower, shave, put on a suit and tie, and come back down here. You're going to the dinner. I will sit with you. And then you will stay for the dance."

The Sansei came back down, and we went to the dinner. Two hours later, he was dancing and laughing like everybody else in

the ballroom.

Grayce taught both of us middle-aged men how to live when you are defeated. I learned from her in Chicago, but have yet to live up to the standards that ordered her life.

I will miss you Grayce and Hiro. Thank you for everything.

--Grant Ujifusa