

The Japanese Community in Greenwich

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Julie Otsuka's book, *When the Emperor Was Divine*, draws us into a time when Japanese Americans were not only viewed with suspicion but were also torn from their homes and forced to live in internment camps. Over the years these dark times have receded into distant memory, and Japanese Americans have long ago regained their rightful homes. So it is jarring sometimes to realize that today, when Japanese citizens come to this country permanently or for work-related extended stays, they may yet feel isolated in our towns and communities.

Of the various interviews in the Oral History Project pertaining to the Japanese community in Greenwich, there are a handful that illuminate recurrent themes. One in particular encapsulates the experiences of a family newly arrived to these shores. One focuses on the Japanese educational experience in the area, and another highlights the benefit derived from an enriching cultural exchange.

One of our interviews takes place in the home of the Kurokawa family. ("**A Japanese Family Living in Greenwich," September 8, 1995**) at a time when many families were relocating to this area from Japan. Mr. Kurokawa, who had come to the United States in 1993 after having lived in Brazil and Indonesia, came to Greenwich with his wife and daughter for its family atmosphere. The Kurokawas were happy to be so near parks and other recreational facilities, to shop in the stores lining Greenwich Avenue, but he, his wife, and their daughter, Mai, all struggled with the language, hindering them from socializing with their neighbors. Mai counted among her friends those who attended the "Juku" or Japanese cram school, where she found a warm atmosphere and camaraderie with fellow Japanese students. For all their graciousness and high regard for Greenwich, in the interview, the Kurokawas seem removed from the community, in spite of their best intentions to plunge into American life in their new hometown.

Indeed, there was a time, long after World War II, when Greenwich did not extend a welcoming hand to its would-be Japanese neighbors. One of our interviews, "**The Greenwich Japanese School," May 2, 1996**, is narrated by David Albert, an attorney who represented the school in their efforts to move to the Daycroft property where Rosemary Hall, an independent girls' school, had been. Mr. Albert, experienced in zoning law and sure the application process to approve the new school would be an easy one, was shocked – and dismayed – by what transpired. Although he was first approached in 1989, the "simple" approval process took three years to complete, mostly, according to Mr. Albert, because of the many roadblocks put in place by the community.

Neighbors who had never joined forces before formed the “Save Lower Lake Avenue Association” to keep the school out, throwing up issues of traffic, zoning, and even floor area ratio issues, although the property had been a school previously. For each of the objections raised, for each denial, the Japanese applicants met the demands placed on them and did not give up. Finally an agreement was reached, and the school opened its doors in the fall of 1992.

Since that time, the Japanese School in Greenwich has been an exemplary neighbor, garnering praise from all quarters. An interesting sidebar noted by Mr. Albert sheds light on the kind of neighbor the Japanese School was destined to become. One of the most vociferous opponents to the school was a woman who ran a catering business out of her home (probably in violation of code, Mr. Albert adds), and when the property was finally settled and the school opened, who was the caterer the Japanese administrators selected for their first event? None other than that same vocal opponent.

Another of our interviews attests to the value of bridging our cultural differences by reaching out to one another, this one narrated by Kate McClelland*, then director of youth services for the Perrot Memorial Library (“**Storytelling at the Perrot Memorial Library,**” **August, 1996**). She tells of connecting with the Japanese community of Greenwich through Marian Phillips (one of our Oral History Project members) who was, at the time, tutoring Japanese women in English. Ms. Phillips happened to mention that one of her students, Masako Sueyoshi, was a storyteller and a puppeteer. Formally trained in Japan, she had brought with her a library of nearly 500 children’s books and was telling stories in Japanese in her home in Old Greenwich. Popular with the Japanese community, these storytelling events were so well attended, Ms. Phillips suggested holding the event in the library.

As it turned out, Masako Sueyoshi, “a brilliant storyteller,” proved to be a huge hit at the library. Soon she immersed herself in American storytelling, although her English was limited. She began competing in events across state and after only a few months, she was “the hit of the evening” in the worldwide event called Tellabration, a storytelling event mounted annually the Saturday before Thanksgiving. From telling stories in her home in Japanese to a Japanese audience to reaching a diverse audience of many hundreds, Ms. Sueyoshi opened doors and minds with her storytelling across the state and the country. When she finally returned to Japan years later, she had left a cultural legacy that reverberates to this day – and she donated all her books to the Perrot.

**Kate McClelland died in a tragic car accident in 2009 after 29 years of service at the Perrot Memorial Library.*