



PACIFIC CITIZEN



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A SONG FOR YOU

With 'Omoiyari,' Kishi Bashi Gives a Soundtrack to the Incarceration Experience.



KISHI BASHI
MUSIC FROM THE SONG FILM:
OMOIYARI
おもいやり

FELLOWS CORNER

MY 2023 POSTON PILGRIMAGE EXPERIENCE

An inspiring journey to see firsthand the importance of 'solidarity, intersectionality, community care and healing'

By *Bridget Keaveney, JACL Norman Y. Mineta Fellow*



On Oct. 13, my colleague and I made the journey to Poston, Ariz., to stand alongside survivors, descendants, fellow activists and educators in honoring the nearly 18,000 Japanese Americans who were forcibly removed and incarcerated at Poston Incarceration Camp, located on the Colorado River Indian Tribes reservation.

This year's pilgrimage program was organized by the Poston Community Alliance in collaboration with the local Colorado River Indian Tribes Tribal Council, made up of four distinct Native American tribes: the Mohave, Chemehuevi, Hopi and Navajo.

Together with the CRIT Tribal Council, the Poston Community Alliance worked to "uphold the memories of camp life and highlight the significant links and relationships between the Japanese American incarcerates and members of the tribal community."

In preparation for my first pilgrimage experience, I spent time beforehand reflecting upon the events and relationships that brought me to this very moment.

My earliest memory of learning about the Japanese American incarceration was through a friend of my parents, who was Japanese American. They had very briefly mentioned it during a conversation that I had overheard when I was 8 or so years old; however, it all but left me until my first year of college, during an Ethnic Studies course,

when I officially learned about the Japanese American incarceration in a classroom setting.

My interest and curiosity to learn more eventually led me to the Japanese American Museum of Oregon, where I had the opportunity to delve deeper and learn from local educators and advocates about the importance and need to preserve this history and protect the legacy of those who endured the unimaginable.

As a Shin-Nikkei raised in rural Oregon who had difficulty in fully embracing their identity and heritage, it meant the world to finally connect with other Japanese Americans. My understanding of Japanese American history has expanded thanks to those who welcomed me with open arms. It is thanks to these connections that the work of preserving Japanese American history has more or less become my life's work.

In the five years since my first day at JAMO, I have met and befriended a number of survivors and their descendants who have shared with me their personal experiences and work in collective healing.

It has been incredibly humbling to hear firsthand from so many people within the community their personal journeys and reasons to advocate on behalf of other harmed communities. The injustice against the Japanese American community is one that I am still learning by the day and is one that I hope to further educate myself on in the years to come. It is for those reasons that I jumped at the chance to attend and participate in the Poston Pilgrimage this year.

My colleague, Matt Weisbly, and I proceeded to register ourselves for the program. We then found ourselves making the four-hour drive from Los Angeles to Poston.

The landscape engulfing us was dry, dusty and hot. As we made our way toward Poston, I couldn't help but imagine the sheer fear that must have gripped those who were forcibly removed, not knowing where they were going and for how long. As I reflect back on this moment of our trip, I am overwhelmed with emotion.

Shortly after we arrived at our

destination, we were given a warm welcome by members and volunteers of the Poston Community Alliance. Our time there began with a presentation by Grant Din of the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation, who provided an in-depth history lesson on the former Angel Island immigration station, sharing that many of the earliest people to immigrate were those who were Japanese. The provided historical context allowed me and others the chance to understand the Japanese diaspora experience at the time.

Following his presentation, the day after was a daylong experience of visiting historical buildings and monuments, as well as attending several workshops. There was also a beautiful opening ceremony that was held in collaboration with the CRIT Museum and included several traditional indigenous dances in addition to a blessing provided by Buddhist priest and historian Duncan Ryuken Williams.

Once the opening ceremony came to an end, the other attendees and I proceeded to head to the Poston Monument Memorial. Upon arriving on location, the first thing Matt and I took notice of was a paper crane on the ground, which was covered in a layer of dust. It wasn't long before we took notice of the other paper cranes strewn across the two pillars that are present, which serve as the monument.

Each pillar featured several panels that included historical information about the camp, including daily life. As I absorbed the information, I couldn't help but notice the families and individuals around me taking in the monument. It was a beautiful moment that brought together not only generations of families together but also activists and other community members alike. To have the opportunity to pay tribute onsite and in person is something that I will cherish for the rest of my days.

Soon after, we made our way to the last remaining buildings left of Poston, located on site 2 of the former camp. It was there that I learned that Poston was made up of three sites, each given

a different name to distinguish them: Roasten, Toastin and Dustin.

We began our tour by visiting the ground's school buildings and auditoriums. Unfortunately, over time, many of those said buildings have been vandalized or torched, ruining their state and leaving them in a hazardous state. Of the buildings that we visited, the most well-maintained and protected was the former barrack, which was housed in a large shedlike building.

Outside of my experience visiting the preserved barrack at the Japanese American National Museum, I had never seen another one in person until that moment. It was shocking to see just how fragile and open it was; granted, many pieces were missing or on the cusp of breaking off, but using my imagination and the information plaques surrounding me, I was able to piece together not only a good visual but also a better understanding of what it must have been like calling such a small enclosed space home.

With barely any insulation, it wasn't hard to imagine how challenging and unbearable it must have been



A view of the former auditorium, which is located on site 1 of Poston.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF BRIDGET KEAVENEY

to fight off the hot dry air and local verminents on a daily basis. I was told that temperatures could reach up to 115 at their hottest. Sitting on this fact, I took in every inch. This may be the one and only time I will get the chance to fully confront and process the realities of camp life, and I wanted to make sure I left as informed as I could be on the harsh conditions that resulted from such an inhumane decision.

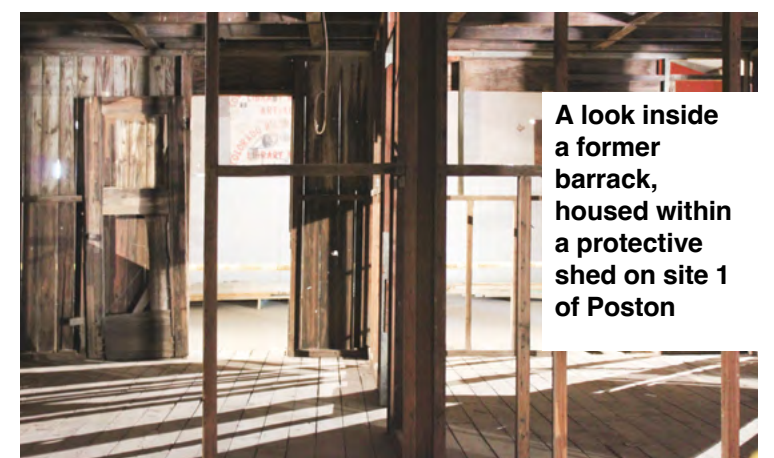
We proceeded to finish our day at La Pera Elementary School, where attendees had the chance to immerse themselves further through the various workshops that were made available. La Pera Elementary stands on where site 2 of Poston once stood. Seeing it be used in the present very much felt like a full-circle moment. Our afternoon started with boxed lunches and a presentation by Matthew Asada, son of former EDC Gov. Michael Asada.

In his presentation, Matthew shared with us his family's history and his journey of retracing and uncovering his family's roots in this country. It was a touching tribute to his ancestors, made all the more special with the presence of his family at the pilgrimage.

I'm very grateful to have learned as much as I did during that session. Once lunch was completed, participants were allowed to attend the workshops of their choice. Both my colleague Matt and I attended a session on Poston's Labor History and on the Munemitsu & Mendez Family Stories. Both were incredibly insightful, each leaving me with a wealth of knowledge I didn't have prior.

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Amelia Flores, chairwoman of the Colorado River Indian Tribes, provides welcoming remarks at the Poston Pilgrimage's opening ceremony at the CRIT Museum.



A look inside a former barrack, housed within a protective shed on site 1 of Poston

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The Labor History workshop was presented by Katie Nuss, who delved into Poston's agricultural history. It was revealed to us that a majority of those who were incarcerated at Poston were gardeners from California. It was shared that the "development of agriculture was a priority in 1942 of the Office of Indian Affairs," who



A string of cranes hangs from the Poston Memorial Monument.

were intent on bringing vegetation to the area.

An irrigation system was soon created by hand by those imprisoned at Poston that consisted of a canal that ran through all three sites within the camp. An infographic from earlier in the day shared that 34 varieties of food crops were harvested, with white daikon being one of the most successful crops.

In addition, it was written that nearly 85 percent of the food that was consumed in Poston was grown on site. In total, those who farmed were able to yield 9,149 pounds of crops per acre. The contributions emitted from that time are still felt today by members of the CRIT.

Learning the historic intersections between the two communities, and the camaraderie that developed as a result, was moving to say the least. I appreciate the message that was made toward the end of the presentation that asserted that CRIT members and Japanese Americans jointly hold the Poston story.

For the Munemitsu and Mendez Family Stories workshop, I had the privilege of listening directly to historian and descendant Janice Munemitsu, who shared her family's history and ties to the Mendez

A paper crane is found on the dusty grounds of the Poston Memorial Monument.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF BRIDGET KEAVENEY



family, who are credited for their role in desegregating schools in California through their monumental case, *Mendez, et. al v. Westminster (1947)*, seven years before *Brown v. Education (1954)*.

During the incarceration, Janice's father, Tad Munemitsu, leased their family farm to Gonzalo and Felicitas Mendez. As written on Janice's website in her book, "The Kindness of Color: The Story of Two Families behind Mendez, et al. v. Westminster, the 1947 Desegregation of California Public Schools," "When the Mendez family moved to the Westminster farm, the Mendez children were denied entry to the 'white' school and forced to go to the 'Mexican' school with inferior academics. Racism by the government and school districts denied both families of their consti-

tutional amendment freedoms and rights, but acts of kindness along the way created the path to justice (About the Kindness of Color)."

I was moved by what I had learned through this presentation and left feeling more motivated to fight against laws restricting citizenship and land ownership, as well as segregation of schools and book bans.

Our pilgrimage ended with a banquet and keynote by Williams, who, together with Creative Director Sunyoung Lee, co-created a project entitled "Ireicho," a sacred book that not only addresses the historic erasure of the incarceration camps but also brings visibility to the 125,000 persons of Japanese ancestry who were incarcerated at that time by listing out their full name.

As I reflect back on my time

attending this year's pilgrimage, I harbor an overwhelming sense of appreciation. The past five years have allowed me to connect and learn from inspiring advocates, and through them, learn the importance of solidarity, intersectionality, community care and healing.

I owe a debt of gratitude to every teacher I have had in this space, including all those whom I met at this year's pilgrimage. It is not lost on me how incredibly privileged I was to attend a pilgrimage whereby I got to stand on the very land that was once shared between the members of the CRIT and incarcerated Japanese Americans.

It was a powerful experience that served more or less as a culmination of everything that I have worked on thus far, starting with my work on archiving the works and letters of celebrated artist Rose Niguma, an Oregonian who was incarcerated at Minidoka. It is because of that experience that I feel as strongly as I do in continuing this work.

I am once again thankful to everyone who made this experience possible for me, and to my colleague and best friend Matt, with whom I underwent this enriching experience.

Bridget Keaveney is based in JACL's Washington, D.C., office.

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