

# EXPLORING INTERNMENT'S IMPACT

New Holocaust Museum exhibit shows the trauma, tenacity of Japanese Americans in a dark part of U.S. history

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Forty years after World War II, the U.S. government commissioned a study to examine the impact of the internment of Japanese Americans.

Public hearings included testimony from those who had been imprisoned, many of whom had never before spoken about their experiences.

"They'd been in those camps for 3½ years and kept quiet about it because they wanted to prove their loyalty to the U.S.," said Kristine Aono, who grew up in the Chicago area. "Or, like my parents who were children during that incarceration, they just grew up believing they'd done something wrong and they had something to feel ashamed of, so they did not talk about it."

Today, Aono and other Japanese American artists are keeping those stories alive.

A sampling of their work can be seen in "Resilience — A Sansei Sense of Legacy," a new exhibition at the Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center in Skokie. The exhibit, curated by Jerry Takigawa and Gail Enns, will remain on view through June 1 before heading to a museum in Oklahoma.

As sansei, or third-generation Japanese Americans, the artists have created paintings, sculptures and other works expressing the impact of imprisonment on their families and communities. Several artists use traditional Japanese art techniques and iconography in their pieces.

Visitors will be touched by the beauty of the imagery and expert craftsmanship of the pieces and moved by the themes of dispossession and confinement, as well as apprehension about the welfare of present-day immigrant communities.

Following the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt authorized the imprisonment of Japanese Ameri-



Wendy Maruyama's "The Tag Project: Tule Lake" (left) is composed of replica name tags of prisoners hanging in 12-foot bundles. Reiko Fujii created a glass kimono (right) of photographs from interviewees in her documentary "Detained Alien Enemy." PAT NABONG/SUN-TIMES

cans through Executive Order 9066. Approximately 120,000 Japanese Americans — many from the West Coast — were incarcerated in 10 camps. Many families, who had lived in the U.S. for decades, lost their homes, farms and businesses.

Chicago became the site of a robust Japanese American population showcased in the exhibition. Drawn by factory work, Chicago's Japanese American community grew from hundreds before the war to about 20,000 afterward.

A kimono-shaped community quilt, created by a group of Japanese American artists, expresses life in the city for their families and communities. Titled "Chicago is Home," it is composed of family crests, local buildings and a ladder connecting their past and their dreams. Also on display are photos of local Japanese Americans from the 1940s and 1950s.

The elements in that display

## "RESILIENCE — A SANSEI SENSE OF LEGACY"

**When:** On view through June 1

**Where:** Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center, 9603 Woods Dr., Skokie

**Cost:** \$18

**Info:** [ilholocaustmuseum.org](http://ilholocaustmuseum.org)

were contributed and supported by local families, the Japanese American Service Committee, Northeastern Illinois University, the Chicago Japanese American Historical Society and the Chicago Japanese American Council.

"It's just a wonderful thing as a curator to be able to include the public," said Arielle Weininger, chief curator of collections and exhibitions at the museum. "And when they come and see their story in a major museum, it's just so incredibly touching."

Aono's family was among those

that moved to the Chicago area.

Her mother's side of the family lived in California before being imprisoned in Arkansas. Her father's side of the family was originally from Oregon and was sent to a prison camp in Idaho.

Aono, who grew up in Arlington Heights and Edgewater, heard her parents casually mention things they did in "camp."

"We just assumed they were talking about summer camp," said Aono, who now lives in Maryland.

Learning the truth later, Aono did her own research and encouraged her parents to open up in part by taking them to visit the former sites where they were incarcerated.

She heard details from her father about swimming in a canal and stories from her mother about soil so thick they called it "gumbo." It's taken time for people from her parents' generation to process the

experience, Aono said.

"I think for my parents and many like them, it was growing up feeling that they had to prove that they were good Americans, and they were going to raise American kids," she said. "What they didn't expect was that their kids would be so interested."

Aono's contribution to the exhibition is a wall installation, "Daruma of Resilience II." It depicts Daruma, a Buddhist monk and symbol of toughness in the face of adversity.

The piece also includes government documents referencing the incarceration of Japanese Americans, as well as other forms of discrimination against other groups.

Visitors are encouraged to write out wishes on sticky notes and place them on the wall.

"I see this fight for justice, equality and just basic respect for other human beings to be something that is ongoing," Aono said. "I think that we have to be constantly vigilant in order to make sure that all people are treated fairly. That was one of the reasons why I wanted to do this piece for this show. It's not just a reminder of the camps that my parents and grandparents had been incarcerated in, but it is equating it to all the injustices based on racism and bigotry that have been part of our history in this country."

Among other works in the exhibition is Wendy Maruyama's replicas of identification tags worn by Japanese Americans who were imprisoned. The papers hang in 12-foot bundles from the ceiling.

Reiko Fujii built a glass kimono featuring photographs from interviewees in her documentary, "Detained Alien Enemy." Roger Shimomura created vivid acrylic paintings, including one depicting a hostile, militarized presence at a concentration camp.

Weininger, the museum's chief curator, said she wants the exhibition to be educational for visitors.

"I also hope that they come to have a better understanding of generational trauma and how that can be expressed through art works."