

Life in an internment camp drove Yuri Kochiyama's commitment to social justice

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Image 1. Yuri Kochiyama, of Oakland, California, looks at a memorial erected for the inhabitants of a Japanese-American World War II internment camp in Rohwer, Arkansas, September 26, 2004. The memorial and a cemetery are all that is left of the Rohwer Relocation Center that once housed thousands of Japanese-American detainees during the war. Hundreds of former internment detainees and their family visited the camp that day during the "Life Interrupted" national conference. Photo by Mike Wintroath for AP

A tireless activist, Yuri Kochiyama was dedicated to social change. She worked for social justice and in human rights movements for people around the world.

Kochiyama (May 19, 1921 – June 1, 2014) is most widely known for speaking out against the World War II arrest and internment, or imprisonment, of Japanese-Americans. Her own father died after being detained.

Many people have also heard of her presence on the stage at the Audubon Ballroom with Malcolm X on the day he was killed.

Early Life

Kochiyama was born and raised in San Pedro, California. After Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, her father, who had just come out of surgery, was arrested and detained in a hospital. "He was the only Japanese in that hospital," Kochiyama recalls. "So they hung a sheet around him that said, 'Prisoner of War.'" He was held for six weeks and his health declined. He died the day after he was released.

In 1943, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066. It said that all people of Japanese ancestry, both citizens and non-citizens, must move inland from the West Coast and away from the Pacific military zone. Japanese-Americans were sent to internment camps. Kochiyama and her family were sent to an internment camp in Jerome, Arkansas for two years. This experience and her father's death made Kochiyama highly aware of governmental abuses and would forever bond her to those engaged in political struggles. After being released, she moved to New York in 1946 and married Bill Kochiyama. He was a veteran of the all Japanese-American 442nd combat unit of the U.S. Army.



Political Activism And Meeting Malcolm X

Kochiyama's activism started in Harlem in the early 1960s. While there, she participated in the Asian-American, African-American and Third World movements for civil and human rights, ethnic studies and against the war in Vietnam. She was a fixture in support movements involving organizations such as the Young Lords and the Harlem Community for Self Defense.

As founder of Asian-Americans for Action, she also sought to build a more political Asian-American movement. She hoped it would link itself to the struggle for black liberation. "Racism has placed all ethnic peoples in similar positions of oppression, poverty and marginalization."

In 1963, she met the famous African-American activist Malcolm X. Their friendship and political alliance changed her life and outlook. She joined his group, the Organization for Afro-American Unity, to work for racial justice and human rights. Yuri was present on the day he was tragically shot and killed in 1965. In the Life magazine article "Death of Malcolm X," she can be seen crouched in the background, cradling Malcolm X's head.

In the 1980s, Kochiyama worked in the redress and reparations movement for Japanese-Americans along with her husband, Bill. It sought monetary compensation and a government apology for the prisoners' mistreatment during the war. Both of those goals were achieved. They also received money from the government to start an organization to educate the public about Japanese internment.

Death And Legacy

Support for political prisoners was a consistent thread in Kochiyama's work. She fought to help African-Americans, Puerto Ricans, Native Americans, Asian-Americans and progressive whites fighting for social change that had been imprisoned.

Lifelong freedom fighter Yuri Kochiyama passed away on June 1, 2014 at the age of 93.