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Connecting a NewGen to J-A Internment

Emily Wilson, Mar 16, 2007

In the Skylight Gallery of the San Francisco Main Library, a video plays showing artist Ruth Okimoto, whose family was in a prison camp in the 1940s. Their only crime was being Japanese.

Several years ago, Okimoto, along with 15 other internees and children of internees, including playwright Philip Kan Gotanda and poet Janice Mirikitani, spoke to students at George Washington High School in San Francisco about having to leave pets behind, being called a Jap, and only being allowed to take two suitcases. The students created an hourlong video, now part of the exhibit *If They Came for Me Today ...* a project by the Oakland nonprofit Community Works.

Ruth Morgan, the group's director, points out the internees' pictures and stories, the poetry by the students responding to the internment, and suitcases that the students filled with things like photos, boy scout badges and warm clothing, representing how little the internees were allowed to take: only what they could carry.

Morgan started the Japanese American Internment Project as a way to make history real to students. This year, to expand the project's reach, she brought it to a Community Works class called the Roots program, for students impacted by incarceration at Balboa High School and Horace Mann Middle School.

Those students created a 40-foot fence, "Weaving Words," which is now part of the exhibit. It intertwines personal stories with a collective historical legacy.

"I think they were much more able to connect to the legacy of the internment, which is also a legacy of incarceration," Morgan said. "The people they studied were not just those interned, but the children of internees, so I think they made that very direct connection."

Jean Teodoro, a 17-year-old Roots program student, wrote a poem that parallels the Japanese American internment with current situations, especially involving Arab Americans.

"I read this magazine called *Hyphen* and it talked about how brown was the new black," he said. "They just come through the airports and they get sent to different places they're not supposed to be and whatever they say it doesn't seem to work."

San Francisco Public Defender Jeff Adachi, whose parents and grandparents were interned, says that the students are going beyond learning about 120,000 West Coast Japanese who were put behind barbed wire over 60 years ago.

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“By making them internalize it and express it, whether that's through video arts, through writing or through live performance, I think it takes on a new level of significance,” he says.

Mirikitani's mother was a mail carrier in the camps who delivered letters to an issei couple whose sons had been killed in the war.

“That was one of the stories that the kids seemed to really relate to,” Mirikitani said. “Can you imagine the irony of having your parents in a prison camp and you're fighting for the democracy and the freedom you're supposed to believe in?”

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