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### **Unity Transcends Barriers: Phil Hayasaka and the Unification of Asian Americans**

Imagine standing at the doorway as a young child, watching helplessly as FBI agents storm your home. Imagine gazing up at your mother, who speaks little English and is equally dazed and confused. Imagine watching your father being taken away to immigration jail, for no crime at all. Phil Hayasaka, a Japanese American growing up in Beacon Hill, experienced just this. After being incarcerated in an internment camp in Puyallup and transferred to Idaho during World War 2, he “returned to Seattle to help restart his father’s business and attend college at the University of Washington” (“Phil Hayasaka”). In spite of having his life uprooted by this injustice, Phil Hayasaka went on to become a major advocate for Asian Americans and other people of color in the Seattle area. His work is a testament to the power of unity to transcend surface level racial barriers to stimulate change. Enduring harassment and judgement for his efforts, Phil Hayasaka’s dedication to racial justice has inspired lasting impact on the Seattle we live in today.

Phil first became involved with advocacy as he served as president of the Japanese American Citizens’ League and the Jackson Street Community Council, a multi-racial advocacy organization encompassing “parts of Seattle’s African American neighborhood, the Central District, and its Asian American neighborhood, Chinatown/ International District” (“Phil Hayasaka”). This was where he first encountered the power of unity. The Jackson Street Community Council would host potlucks to encourage neighbors to meet one another. One such event was in today’s International District. They had races where representatives of the Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino communities would race in rickshaws. Hayasaka noted that this seemingly small gesture “did get all the races in that district together again, to work together” (Griffey). The

divisions within the Asian community were beginning to break down because of his work and his commitment to creating unity.

Phil Hayasaka's advocacy continued as he became the first director of the Seattle Human Rights Commission. Established in 1963, the organization sought to advise the city regarding human rights issues. However, Phil Hayasaka's position did not come without controversy. Members of other minority communities felt that Hayasaka would not fairly represent their interests. However, he was dedicated to creating unity among these seemingly disparate groups, and personally connecting with individuals. Hayasaka reported that "When I was first appointed to be Director of the Commission, the Black community particularly was opposed to it. And there was a minister, Reverend Lance Jackson who was very active with that group. But we knew each other through the Jackson Street Council days" (Griffey). Through this personal connection from his previous advocacy, Hayasaka was able to work to minimize the initial mistrust among the African American community. Among the Jewish community, Hayasaka met with them, and after a meeting, he reported one Jewish individual told him, "You know, we have a lot in common, the Jewish group and the Japanese group. We share a lot of background that's the same and the commonality would bind us together" (Griffey). Once again, Hayasaka remained committed to forming personal bonds with members of various communities. These personal connections showed individuals of differing ethnic groups that they had more in common with Hayasaka and the Japanese American community than they expected. Despite the initial opposition he faced, Hayasaka was willing to dedicate the effort to creating relationships and meaningful change.

Through gaining the trust of various other ethnic communities, Hayasaka and the rest of the Seattle Human Rights Commission dedicated themselves to advocating for racial minorities.

The Commission created a Fair Housing Ordinance that prohibited racial discrimination in renting or selling property. Through a hard fought battle, they “convinced the City Council to pass open housing legislation” (“Phil Hayasaka”). The ordinance was remanded to a vote by citizens, and in 1964 was rescinded by Seattle voters. Despite Hayasaka and the entire commission’s efforts to legalize housing equality, it remained a controversial issue among voters. This defeat was a devastating blow to their hard work. However, Hayasaka’s refusal to waver in the face of public disapproval of his efforts reflects upon his courage to persist.

Hayasaka’s advocacy days were far from over. In 1969, Hayasaka co-founded Asian Coalition for Equality (ACE), “the first civil rights organization in Seattle whose mission was to mobilize Asian Americans in multi-racial solidarity campaigns and promote Asian American consciousness” (“Asian Coalition for Equality (ACE)”). Hayasaka was a trailblazer in advocating for Asian Americans. At the time, civil rights was mainly seen as a “predominantly black-and-white issue in which Asians had no part” (Ishizuka). Hayasaka wanted to change this reality. However, existing racial tensions already presented initial barriers to his cause. Hayasaka reported, “There was a lot of mistrust between Japanese and Chinese and Filipinos at that time, mainly because we didn’t know each other. We had common problems, so I thought we should get together and do this as a team” (Ishizuka). These animosities were reinforced by the “hostile external society” that reinforced each group’s mentality of “fending for itself” (Ishizuka). In the face of a Western society that looked down upon all Asian Americans, each individual ethnic group felt desperate to survive and thus depended on its own kind. Despite these seemingly insurmountable barriers, Hayasaka foresaw the powerful change Asian Americans could create through their unity. He recruited members of each community to come together to mutually work on advancing Asian American causes. However, this was an uphill battle. It took two years of

facilitating vulnerable conversation to break down divisions. Hayasaka persisted throughout those two years, refusing to desist from his cause.

Because of Hayasaka's persistence, the Asian Coalition for Equality was able to create monumental change. In July of 1969, Asian Coalition for Equality undergraduate and graduate students demanded that the University of Washington's affirmative action program include recruiting for Asian Americans. A member of the Asian Coalition, Larry Matsuda, observed, "The Special Education Program recruits all other races but Asians and Orientals. It is ridiculous to ignore this population of about 30,000 in the Greater Seattle Area" (Dykeman). As a result, five students were appointed as recruiters for Asian students ("U.W. Appoints 5 Students As Recruiters of Asians"). The efforts of the Asian Coalition resulted in the University of Washington's recognition of the Asian community, and laid the groundwork for the university's first Asian American student organization. Today, the University of Washington is 22.5% Asian. Clearly, Asian Americans have become a key component of their campus community, and Hayasaka's work contributed to this reality today.

However, the Asian Coalition for Equality's work was not limited to solely benefitting Asian Americans. In August and September of 1969, ACE mobilized Asian Americans to participate "in direct action protests led by the Central Contractors Association that demanded the desegregation of the region's construction industry" and later respond to police brutality in suppressing the protests ("Asian Coalition for Equality (ACE)"). ACE's unity with the black community on the issue of labor discrimination and police brutality shocked the broader Seattle area. The Seattle Times published an article titled "Should Orientals Join Blacks in Racial Protest?" and asked, "Yellow power: A new concept in the black and white of civil rights - or an exercise in futility?" (Ishizuka). This derogatory article was emblematic of how broader society

looked down upon ACE as passive actors, and were shocked by their bold stance. Despite the Seattle Times and other sources implying that the civil rights movement had no space for Asian Americans, Hayasaka and other spokespeople asserted how ACE should take an active role in advocating for civil rights. Once again, Hayasaka did not bend in the face of scorn of his work, and instead continued to urge Asian Americans to take a stand.

Civic courage is the courage and power to take a stand for a major social issue, and Phil Hayasaka possessed this remarkable quality throughout his entire lifetime. As a child, he was forced to endure internment camps, but instead of growing resentful, he dedicated the rest of his life to creating racial unity for change. When he became director of the Seattle Human Rights Commission, other racial minority groups opposed his leadership. However, Hayasaka refused to back down, and committed himself to forming personal bonds and connections with each of these communities. As he led the Asian Coalition for Equality, he had to overcome deep barriers between different Asian ethnic groups. Hayasaka spent two years creating open dialogue, once again not quitting. When the Seattle Times mocked ACE's work, he only continued to advocate for Asians' active involvement in the civil rights movement. Again and again, Phil Hayasaka risked scorn, disapproval, and mistrust of his efforts to create meaningful change. His work exemplifies the very definition of civic courage.

Today, Asian American groups are prevalent on the University of Washington's campus. Today, we have ordinances in place mandating racial equality in housing. Today, the construction industry has been desegregated. All of these forms of progress have been enabled because of Phil Hayaska's work, which laid the foundation for creating a more equitable future. As an Asian American myself, I am endlessly grateful for his efforts to create recognition and consciousness of my community, which is often diminished by the media and broader society. I

feel fortunate to have my background more recognized, acknowledged, and celebrated today, and it is due in part to the civic courage of Phil Hayasaka.

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