

## The Island Amidst the Storm: The Story of Akiko Kurose

In the Densho Digital Archives, an online service enshrining the memories of this nation's Japanese American innovators, there exists an interview with Seattle's beloved Akiko Kurose. She and her interviewer exchange many laughs and smiles over the course of the interview, and at the end, he asks Kurose, "Is there anything that you would like to say to future generations? Anything that you learned along the way that you'd like to share?" Kurose smiles, and with a knowing twinkle in her eyes, speaks about activism, empowerment, and peace. "If there is anything I would like to leave with my grandchildren, is to have them learn to respect themselves as well as others, and to work for peace. Because peace is what empowers people" [Densho 30].

Akiko Kurose would know a thing or two about respect and peace. She fought all her life to gain that respect, not just for herself but for her family, her students, and for the Japanese-American community. Her parents were unorthodox Japanese parents. Having moved to Seattle to pursue work, her mom was an engineer for their apartment building's boiler room, while her father was a porter for Union station, spending his Fridays making jelly rolls for their Jewish, Chinese, and African American neighbors [HistoryLink]. Kurose gained in her working class childhood a social and racial understanding that would serve her for the rest of her life.

Unfortunately, during such turbulent and stormy times, that racial tolerance was not given to her community. When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in 1941, she could feel the fog of animosity as she walked through the hallways of her high school. However, it was when a school teacher told her, "You people bombed Pearl Harbor." that she became aware of her

"Japaneseness," and began to feel "threatened and nervous." [Densho Encyclopedia]. Soon afterwards, she went from highschool to the Japanese-American internment camp in Puyallup.

There, she saw, in her words, "devastation". She described it feeling like being animals in a zoo. Like many of the Japanese Americans around her, she was raised to be extremely modest, with many in her community hesitant to disrobe even around siblings. However, in the camps, they had no choice. Group showers and shared bathrooms became a source of humiliation for the interned, another reminder of the suspicion and distrust their own government had for them. She remembers thinking, "Why did we have to be born Japanese?" [Densho #5]. Day after day, she lived as an enemy of the state, until she grew resentment for the situation. That resentment for being singled out because of her race festered, until she internalized it onto herself. There was no reason for her incarceration other than her ethnicity. She had to leave her normal teenage life behind, and she longed for those days back.

She could have been bitter and defeated by her internment, however it was here that she truly accepted her parents' pacifist ideals. She could have seen the soldier guarding her barracks as an enemy, but she saw him for the boy that he was, far away from home. She could have seen the US as evil, for taking her brother-in-law off to war and bringing him back in a body bag. For interning her and thousands of other Japanese-Americans. But she didn't. Instead, she found hope, hope that a future free of incarceration lay ahead. Only with that hope could she have compassion, to see the humanity in those around her, no matter how many reasons the world gave Kurose to hate them. She had finally found her peace, and she was yearning to share it.

Years after the war was over, Kurose found herself as an elementary school teacher in the midst of desegregation. The Seattle School District needed to diversify not only its student populations but its faculty as well, and so Kurose was sent to Laurelhurst Elementary as a "token

minority”, as she had put it. The parents at the school were incredibly skeptical and concerned of Kurose, so concerned that one summer afternoon a few parents asked Kurose to come to the school for the meeting. Much to Kurose’s surprise, there was a group of forty parents waiting there. They all asked her questions about her competency as a teacher, as if she was on trial. One parent told her, "Well, if you want to bring your chopsticks and rice bowl, it's okay" [Densho Encyclopedia]. After that meeting, two parents would sit in on her classes every day for a month to assess the quality of her teaching see if she was teaching her students well.

These incidents were not just limited to the parents. Teachers had significant animosity towards Kurose as well. Kurose recalls a child whose mother was also a teacher at Laurelhurst. From the very beginning, the child was standoffish towards Kurose, and when Kurose asked him why he was acting like this, he responded by saying, “I’m not supposed to have a Jap for a teacher.” When his mother was asked about this, she simply responded by saying, “Oh, he wasn’t supposed to say that out of home” [Densho 27].

Despite the racism and harassment that she experienced as a teacher, Kurose never once wavered from her mission to teach the next generation. Kurose employed a teaching style that drew from the compassion that she had learned from her childhood in Seattle as well as in the internment camps, and focused on respecting students as individuals and minimizing punishments. She would start class every day with outside exercises to let the students release their emotions and make way for learning. She prioritized cooperation among the students as opposed to using brute memorization as a metric for learning. She helped students resolve conflicts instead of punishing them. She let her students know that making mistakes was a part of life, and one of the best opportunities to learn. As desegregation continued and more minority

students were bussed into Laurelhurst, Kurose helped to alleviate their anxieties, and did whatever it took to address misbehavior without sending them out into the hallway.

Surely enough, Kurose won over her critics. Her students loved her, as did the parents. The two parents who attended her classes to judge her teaching eventually saw her competence and passion for teaching, and stopped coming. The parent of the standoffish child later became one of her most vocal supporters. The Seattle Times noted that Kurose "touched thousands of children, drew parents into the district, inspired many into public service, set an example for many teachers; she personified the best of what happens inside a classroom" [Densho Encyclopedia]. Her compassion for her students and the example she set as a teacher inspired everybody around her, and soon even those outside of Seattle took note.

In recognition of her lifelong commitment to activism, Kurose was awarded the Presidential Award for Excellence in Teaching in Math and Science by President George HW Bush in 1990. However, this was not to be the highlight of the night. When the President asked Kurose to have a picture taken with him, she declined, saying, "You call yourself the education president, but one stealth bomber could fund how many good teachers? You talk to us about the importance of education, even as you cut the education budget. I hope you remember that education is our top priority" [Historylink]. This moment epitomizes the reason why she was being recognized that day. For her fellow teachers and for peace for future generations, Kurose would do anything. Her tenacity and unwavering focus on her goals was unmatched, and she was unafraid of fighting for those goals wherever, whenever possible.

Ever since she had passed, minorities in the Seattle Area have made huge strides. People of color have been elected to City Council, hired by big companies, and graduating from high school at ever increasing rates. Longtime racial disparities in schools are finally being addressed,

school faculty and students are becoming more diverse, and students more and more feel like they are worth it. From universities to elementary schools, students have begun to recognize the integral role resilience and peace play in making the world a better place. Akiko Kurose would be proud. She recognized that in order to affect social change, real social change, it was the next generation that would have to learn how to affect that change. She dedicated her life to teaching her students in a better way, and showed to all her doubters that she would not be stopped on her quest for making the world a better place. We are the future generations that have inherited Akiko Kurose's dream of respect, peace, and empowerment. Let us strive to make that dream a reality, one student at a time.

#### Work Cited

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