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Orinda proclamation recognizes the 80th anniversary of Japanese interment

By Sora O'Doherty

The Orinda City Council on June 21 issued a proclamation honoring and solemnly remembering the many Japanese Americans who experienced a tragic violation of fundamental civil rights 80 years ago when, by Presidential Executive Order 9066 in 1942, they were forced to leave their homes, employment, and schools and were incarcerated in concentration camps throughout the inland parts of the Western United States. The proclamation, read by Mayor Dennis Fay, acknowledged that over 120,000 Japanese Americans were interned, and that approximately two-thirds of them were born in the United States. Those interned had not been charged with any crimes and were not afforded due process before being forcibly removed from their homes and communities, the proclamation continued.

The proclamation also refers to "the poignant personal memoir, 'Lotus,' written by Chieko Tahira," through which, "we can learn first-hand about the tragic relocation and incarceration experience of a Contra Costa family and the many other families in our county who experienced this terrible episode in our country's history."

The author's daughter, Kimi Tahira Dowell, attended the meeting on her mother's behalf. "My mother," she said, "would have been overcome with emotions to think that her book contributed to this proclamation." She went on to say that her mother had attended Mt. Diablo High School but never graduated. Forced into an arranged marriage, she always regretted not having graduated from high school, but to her credit she nonetheless got this book written. "These are very difficult times, not only for our country but also globally, as we witness the rise of nationalism and some of the telltale signs of a dark past," Tahira said. "Your proclamation brought events that happened 80 years ago to the present and underscores the need to learn from our past to ensure that our history does not repeat itself and affirms the adherence to the rule of law." She concluded by thanking the council very much and saying that she will ensure that her mother and others know of Orinda's bold stance.

The proclamation was put together by Council Member Amy Worth. Worth said at the meeting, "I learned about it (the Japanese internment) when I was 10 years old and I was horrified." She had previously read a copy of "Lotus" that she found in the Orinda Library, but when she looked again, the book was no longer in the library. She has purchased another copy to donate to the library. Worth also mentioned that this year Mt. Diablo High School presented retroactive high school diplomas to those Japanese students whose educations were ended prematurely when they were interned.

Library Manager Michael Beller was also at the meeting. "Memoires like this," he said, "remind us that it can happen here, that tragic decisions, racism and xenophobia can happen here and everywhere." He added his hopes that the public will read "Lotus," and will use other resources at the library in order that "we never forget what happened and to ensure that it doesn't happen again." Council Member Inga Miller agreed that it is "so important to pass along the stories of what happened, the awful, terrible thing that happened in our country's history." She said she was very happy that this book is being restored to the library.

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