

Profile of a Public Historian: Susan Hasegawa

Colin Fisher

In the opening sequence to the film *Democracy Under Pressure: Japanese Americans and World War II*, FBI agents burst in on a contemporary middle-class European American family living in the San Diego suburbs. As horrified family members look on, the agents hustle the father off for unknown relocation. The agents also repeat the process, but now at an African American and an Asian American home. A quote from U.S. Senator Daniel Inouye then appears: "If



Public Historian Susan Hasegawa

this great democracy, with her extraordinary Constitution, could imprison people only because of their ethnic background, it could happen again. And it could happen to anyone, black, brown, yellow or white."

Susan Hasegawa, who served as the project manager for the film, uses this sequence to explain her philosophy of pursuing public history: "always think about what is important to your audience." She pursues this philosophy at San Diego City College, where she is a professor and former chair of the History and Political Science Department. In the classroom, she encourages her students to pursue their own interests and to write papers that weave together oral history and more traditional research. This

approach, she explains, brings the past alive, even for students who hated history in high school.

Hasegawa's approach is also evident in an exhibit that she and Linda Canada created and installed in the San Diego Historical Society's Youth Gallery. "Nikkei Youth Culture: Past, Present, and Future" (on exhibit from November 2006 to March 2007) showed how Nikkei (or those of Japanese descent) teenagers and young adults created a vital youth culture during the first half of the twentieth century. Through the use of sports, boy scouting, dances, outings, and their own newspaper, Japanese American young men and women in San Diego and Imperial County created their own world and their own definition of what it meant to be American.

But for Hasegawa, it was important to make the story of pre-World War II Japanese American youth relevant to youth today. She, in fact, had gotten the

idea to create the youth culture exhibit after attending an Obon Festival at the Buddhist Temple of San Diego on Market Street. She found that contemporary Japanese American youth culture had made the San Diego festival very different than the ones she had attended in her native Hawai'i. Here in California she saw very good traditional dancers who had obviously practiced a great deal, but they wore baggy pants and they occasionally busted out hip-hop moves on the dance floor. At the festival, she also ate an excellent snow cone prepared by a "Goth" kid dressed entirely in black, and she heard the Beach Boys on the temple amplifier. With this in mind, she reached into the past, but also made the past speak to the current generation. For the exhibit, she asked teenagers at the temple to portray contemporary Japanese American youth culture for the public at the San Diego Historical Society.

Although the Nikkei Youth Culture exhibit has closed, we will undoubtedly see more of Hasegawa's installations. This last summer, Hasegawa and Linda Canada worked diligently in the new archival facility of the Japanese American Historical Society on Austin Avenue in Spring Valley. Surrounded by artifacts, donated computer equipment, and carefully arranged archival containers, they prepared for an upcoming exhibit at the Bonita Museum and Cultural Center. The exhibit, called "Homegrown," explores the early twentieth-century Japanese American agricultural experience in southern San Diego County. Profiled in the exhibit is the story of the Oyama family, who fought California's Alien Land Law in court and won an important U.S. Supreme Court victory in 1948.

It is Hasegawa's great hope that the Japanese American Historical Society of San Diego (JAHSSD) will grow and eventually have a more permanent home. The JAHS started in 1993 following a reunion of San Diegans who, during World War II, had been interned in a U.S. government camp located on the Colorado River Tribal Reservation in Poston, Arizona. Until two years ago (when the new archival facility opened), members of the Society (including the late Don Estes, an expert in Japanese American history and a mentor to Hasegawa) kept archives and artifacts in their homes. Hasegawa envisions a larger, more public space that will be open to school groups as well as scholars. The new facility, if and when it is built, will undoubtedly serve as an important forum for continued dialogue between the past and the present.