

PROFILE OF RESISTANCE

Yuri Kochiyama

Japanese American civil rights activist, political activist

“Racism has placed all ethnic peoples in similar positions of oppression poverty and marginalization.”

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FIGURE 1 COURTESY OF WIKIPEDIA

Background Information

Born: May 19, 1921, Died: June 1, 2014.

Yuri Kochiyama was born Mary Yuriko Nakahara on May 19, 1921, in San Pedro, California. As the child of first-generation Japanese Americans, Yuri's commitment to activism was inspired by early traumatic experiences. The 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor by Japan negatively impacted Japanese Americans. Yuri's family was torn apart after authorities took her father into detention for questioning. He died a day after his release. A federal order forced her family, and many other Japanese Americans, to leave their homes. The Kochiyama's went to an internment camp in Arkansas.ⁱ

Resistance

During her three-year incarceration, Yuri volunteered at camps in Mississippi. Her experiences with segregation prompted Yuri to fight for justice and civil rights. Yuri returned home to California at the end of WWII but continually experienced anti-Japanese prejudice. With limited job and housing options, Yuri moved to New York. Yuri quickly got involved in Harlem, a primarily Black and Puerto Rican community. During the 1960s, she worked in many civil rights organizations. Yuri joined the Harlem Parents Committee and participated in non-violent protests with the Congress of Racial Equality.ⁱⁱ Her focus evolved from civil rights to human rights after meeting Malcolm X. Yuri had attended his Liberation School, then joined his Organization of Afro-American Unity. She later hosted a meeting between Malcolm X and Japanese war survivors. The pair highlighted a shared struggle against racism and a denial of human rights. Yuri is seen in an iconic photo holding Malcolm X after his assassination in 1965. In 1969, she joined Asian Americans for Action. The organization modeled itself after Black Power and anti-war organizations. An advocate for reparations, Yuri finally saw the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 pass. The act formally apologized and provided financial compensation to Japanese detention camp internees. As a lifelong anti-war advocate, she continually advocated for peace. After 9/11 Yuri warned others not to use fear to justify discrimination against other.ⁱⁱⁱ

Achievements

In 2010, she received an honorary doctorate from California State University, East Bay.

Essential Questions

1. How were Yuri and other Japanese Americans impacted by the bombing at Pearl Harbor?
2. How did Yuri use her experiences with racism and forced relocation to inspire others?
 - a. How did she resist unfair treatment?
3. Yuri joined many organizations that included people from Black and Brown communities. How did Yuri's friendship with Malcolm X change her view of civil rights?
4. ***Racism has placed all ethnic peoples in similar positions of oppression, poverty, and marginalization.***
 - a. What does this quote mean to you?
 - b. Why is important to learn about other cultures and their experiences and work alongside them?

ⁱ <https://www.nps.gov/people/yuri-kochiyama.htm>

ⁱⁱ <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/riseup/feature/yuri-kochiyama>

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid