

STAND UP FOR JUSTICE

When Japanese Americans were forcibly removed to internment camps following the bombing of Pearl Harbor, they were surprised to find that a Mexican American was among them. Ralph Lazo, a student from Belmont High School in Los Angeles, surprised his classmates by boarding the camp bound train to Manzanar. He spent two and a half years in camp and was accepted as a fellow inmate by his Nisei schoolmates and was remembered as a lively and cheerful friend by all.



Associate producer, Janice Yen

With federal and state grants, NCRR's Education Committee was able to work together with Los Angeles based Visual Communication, to bring Lazo's story to the public. The story of his time in camp entitled "Stand Up For Justice," is a 30 minute film that is geared toward teaching the high school student about the internment of Japanese Americans and the dangers of taking the rights we have under our Constitution for granted. It also shows how one individual can make a statement about justice and can make a difference when our freedoms are at stake.

Because Ralph died in 1992, we had to reconstruct details of his life as a teenager. There were many questions that came up. What were his motivations for going into Manzanar? Was it simply a matter of personal friendships or was he following a strong belief that the imprisonment of his friends was wrong. What was the role of his family in allowing Ralph to leave Los Angeles?

Although we were able to interview many of his friends, we were not able to get a clear detailed picture of his life. With so many unanswered questions, we decided to produce a docu-drama instead of a documentary film. This drama would remain as true to Lazo's experience as possible, but would also use composite characters to highlight some of the feelings and experiences of the inmates of the camps. John Esaki, a veteran film maker with Visual Communications volunteered to draft the script for "Stand Up For Justice."

Actual filming began in 2002, led by a Visual Communication production team. NCRR's Education Committee also swung into action providing logistical support while recruiting over a hundred community members to volunteer as extras for the film. The NCRR committee also brought in donations of money, food and hard to find props.



Costume fitting, Patty Nagano, 2001

As the Associate Producer, I learned a lot about filmmaking. It's like organizing. There are a lot of different skills that have to come together to build a team. I understand now why strong bonds develop among cast and crew. These people have periods of intense activity interspersed with short breaks over very long workdays. They depend on each

other to produce a professional product. None of us foresaw that it would take so long to finish the film! That's one of the consequences of doing a big project on too small a budget. We had to rely on people who would commit to working with very limited resources. It was hard for me to face the NCRR general meetings as the delays kept adding up. I hung in there because NCRR was a co-producer of the film and I felt a responsibility to get the film done.

Our NCRR Education Committee members are great! They are strongly committed to having the public learn about the internment of Japanese Americans and to work for the protection of our civil rights. Although everyone had full time jobs, they showed up at our meetings during



On location at Manzanar with Steve Nagano, Suzy Katsuda, Park ranger, Kim Linse and Patty Nagano

each phase of the project. With such dedication on everyone's part, we gained a good understanding of our weaknesses and collective strengths and knew that we could depend on each other for support!

Finally "Stand Up For Justice" premiered at the 2004 Day of Remembrance program to a capacity audience of over 800 at the Japan America Theater in Little Tokyo. After seven difficult years of fundraising, grant writing, recruiting cast and crew, the night had come to show the film at one of our most important commemorations observed in the Japanese American community! Friends and family of Ralph Lazo were present as well as the many volunteers who had contributed to the making of the film. As befitting fitting the occasion, the Day of Remembrance also honored a wide range of individuals and organizations that had helped the Japanese Americans in their time of need and who were now fighting their own battles against racism and the abrogation of their civil rights.

The NCRR Education Committee has since completed a curriculum guide for the film which will help guide teachers in incorporating it into their lesson plans. Visual Communications and NCRR have also set up a series of exhibition film screenings to allow the public to view the film and advocate for it use in the schools. Due to the enthusiastic reception that "Stand Up For Justice" has received, we anticipate that the film and the curriculum guide will be widely used in the high schools.

Janice Yen November 2004