

AFTER SEPTEMBER 11

The terrorist attack on New York and Washington aroused grave concerns for the members of the Nikkei for Civil Rights and Redress. Fearful of a backlash against the Arab American community, the NCRR called for a rally in Little Tokyo to express both support for the victims and to call attention to the consequences of victimizing and assigning blame to the wrong people. With over 300 persons attending the candlelight vigil, NCRR speaker Lillian Nakano emphasized the responsibility of Japanese Americans to speak out against “scapegoating” of anyone. Speakers representing the Muslim Public Affairs Council, the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee and the Council on American Islamic Relations in turn expressed their appreciation to the Japanese American community for their show of support.

As a follow up to the event, a 9-11 Committee was formed within the NCRR to continue planning educational events that would help the Japanese American and Asian Pacific Community get to know the Arab American and Muslim communities better. Mike Yanagita was one who felt that the events of 9-11 was a wake up call for him to get involved again. We needed to let the Muslim community know about the internment



At a candlelight vigil in Little Tokyo in memory of the victims of 9/11, Lillian Nakano, speaks out against “scapegoating”

and our experiences with such things as “detention,” and racism.” “Building a relationship is important because we can then get to count on each other. I don’t know if we have answers to everything, he said, but at least they know that we will be there for them and they are not by themselves.”

In the following months the 9-11 Committee sponsored a presentation by the Afghan Women’s Mission about their work in Afghanistan, followed by a “Break the Fast” event in December to learn about Ramadan. This program was held at the Senshin Buddhist Temple near Exposition Park. Both Muslim and Buddhist speakers reiterated that they were committed to the practice of mercy, justice and compassion. They were united in their acceptance of the belief that there is but one humanity.

In February of 2002, the NCRR invited Michel Shehadeh, then Western Regional Director of the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, to speak at the Day of Remembrance program. He recalled the violations of the Constitution in the internment of the Japanese Americans. Shehadeh expressed appreciation to the Japanese American community for their continuing support at this critical moment and hoped that both communities can work together in insuring and protecting the civil liberties of all people in this country.

These sentiments were echoed at the Manzanar Pilgrimage in April by Sam Hakim of the Muslim Public Affairs Council. Said Hakim, “..today we reflect on a sad part of our modern history and remember how innocent fellow citizens were robbed of their human dignity and in a large scale effort of collective punishment against an entire ethnic group of our society. As we bow in respect for those who suffered at the hands of this injustice, we wonder why it took 46 years to admit the moral tragedy of Manzanar. The important issue here is not the need for more compensation or apologies but a commitment from our country of no more Manzanars!”

“..I am sharing the problems of the U.S. Muslim and Arab community with you today because I know you went through a similar miscarriage of justice. You feel our pain and suffering. You understand our humiliation when others suspect your loyalty to this country, when they question your motives, not because of something you did but because of who you are.”

In January of 2003, a “special registration” was held by the Immigration and Naturalization Service for persons from various Muslim nations, such as Afghanistan, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and the United Arab Emirates. The targets for this registration were males who were 16 years and older and not permanent residents. Failure to register could mean deportation or arrest. NCRR volunteers like Kay Ochi were active participants in “monitoring” people called in for the registration. In this way, no one could just “disappear” and it would be public knowledge as to who had appeared to register.

The 9-11 Committee has since successfully sponsored more “Break the Fast” programs. According to Yanagita, the program changes each year. “It gets a little more organized and it attracts a wider range of people. The last one (held at Higashi Hongwanji Buddhist Temple in Little Tokyo in 2004) was more of an interfaith activity. We brought together a Jewish Rabbi, a Catholic

Priest, a Christian Minister, a Buddhist Priest and a Native American Spiritual Elder.”

The effort to build bridges of understanding with the Muslim American community will be a continuing and enlightening process. As with our earlier experience with the Navajos and Hopi of Big Mountain, the National Coalition for Redress/Reparations which changed it's name to the Nikkei for Civil Rights and Redress, did not change it's obligations to it's original goals. NCRR is as committed to helping those it sees in like situations today as it was when the organization was founded in 1980.