

## **Martha Nakagawa: An Appreciation**

*By Phil Tajitsu Nash*

Like many Asian American community journalists, Martha Nakagawa was also an essayist, editor, activist, organizer, historian, curator and ethnographer. Her field work and her mission were to help define a community, describe it, report on its activities, and show it in the context of a broader world of peoples.

Martha went far beyond most of us on this mission, however, because of her big heart, her boundless enthusiasm, and her devotion to telling the whole story — not just the easy to find story, the happy happy story or the accepted story. Her work of over three decades to uncover, report on and mainstream the stories of the Heart Mountain Draft Resisters, Japanese Latin Americans, those who responded “No” to the infamous Questions 27 and 28 on the government’s wartime loyalty assessment, and others will long be remembered by future historians of our Japanese American and Asian American lives.

I don’t remember exactly when I met Martha in the 1980s. Perhaps at some Asian American community event or some government proceeding related to our community. Over the course of several decades, however, I remember her face and her byline while attending commemorations, hearings, festivals, conferences and much more. Often paying her own way (yes, community newspapers do not pay much because they do not make much either), I would even see Martha at venues far away from her West Coast base.

Martha served as my editor on several occasions and, because she lived in Los Angeles and I have lived mostly in New York City and Washington, D.C., most

of our contact was via email or letter or fax or phone. As internet amphibians, we lived through the predigital era when you had to go to the library to check your dates and facts, not just do a Google search. When she was editing one of my pieces (I'm trying to keep this under 750 words, Martha!), we had to exchange a phone call, not participate in asynchronous communication via text or email. Urgent stories were faxed, and less urgent stories were sent by United States mail.

If you google Martha's name and read the many pieces she wrote over the decades in the Rafu Shimpo, Hokubei Mainichi, Nichi Bei Times, Hawaii Herald, Pacific Citizen, Asian Week and many more, what stands out for me is her tremendous humanity — her care for the human beings she was describing and the causes they advocated.

For example, in an obituary for Japanese Latin American redress leader Art Shibayama that she wrote in 2018, Martha wrote over 2,000 words to give readers not only a fully three-dimensional story of Art's birth in Peru and his family's struggles after being kidnapped from Peru and held at the Crystal City Internment camp, but also a compelling overview of the injustices that faced every Japanese Latin American after the war and after they were excluded from the Civil Liberties Act in 1988. By ending her obit on Shibayama with a reference to the ongoing redress case that Art and others had filed in the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights, Martha reminded us that the Japanese American redress movement was not over until everyone who suffered had received redress.

[\(https://www.nichibei.org/2018/08/art-shibayama-who-continued-fight-for-japanese-latin-american-redress-dies/\)](https://www.nichibei.org/2018/08/art-shibayama-who-continued-fight-for-japanese-latin-american-redress-dies/)

Martha effortlessly moved back and forth between the journalistic and scholarly sides of Asian American writing, most notably with her assistance in the curation of the massive Jack and Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga collection at the UCLA Asian American Studies Center

[\(http://pdf.oac.cdlib.org/pdf/ucla/mss/herzi451.pdf\)](http://pdf.oac.cdlib.org/pdf/ucla/mss/herzi451.pdf), her in-depth reporting on the work of Frank Abe and others highlighting the stories of those who resisted the forced wartime Japanese American incarceration [\(https://resisters.com/\)](https://resisters.com/), and her work for the Seattle-based Japanese American Densho Encyclopedia project, where she conducted around 60 oral histories and wrote 11 substantive articles that highlighted the lives of William Hohri, Cedric Shimo, Emiko Omori and others. [\(https://encyclopedia.densho.org/authors/Martha\\_Nakagawa/\)](https://encyclopedia.densho.org/authors/Martha_Nakagawa/)

The last time I saw Martha in person was when she came to D.C. to cover a hearing on Japanese Latin American redress at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in 2017 [\(https://jlacampaignforjustice.org/victoryatiachr/\)](https://jlacampaignforjustice.org/victoryatiachr/). Typically, she paid her own way, and took her own photos to accompany her story. A bunch of JLA's and their supporters went out to eat after the hearing, and Martha joined us. As always, she asked how each of us was doing, and built on her immense web of care by chatting with students new to the redress struggle as well as octogenarians she had known for decades.

While each of us in Martha's web of care is feeling the absence of a community treasure and friend after her untimely passing on July 28, we are

comforted by knowing that Martha's writing and the way she lived her life provide roadmaps toward a world where there will be justice for all. Thanks, Martha, for a life well lived.

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