

In MEMORIAM

Seminal Filmmaker Robert Nakamura Dead at 88

Creative force played key roles at VC, UCLA, JANM's Media Center.

By P.C. Staff

Robert Akira Nakamura, known to his legion of friends, colleagues and students as Bob, the filmmaker whose works spanned decades and experimental, documentary and dramatic genres and who helped to found and lead several still-extant community organizations with missions dedicated to visual storytelling, died June 10 at home in Culver City, Calif. He was 88.

Apropos of his life in pictures, Nakamura's struggles with Parkinson's disease in the waning months of his life were starkly and unflinchingly captured in the award-winning documentary "Third Act," released earlier this year (see April 4, 2025, *Pacific Citizen*, tinyurl.com/2khhzd6s).

Like many of his generation of Japanese Americans who resided along the West Coast when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941, which resulted in America's entry into World War II — and the forced removal from the West Coast states and subsequent incarceration of more than 125,000 ethnic Japanese — Nakamura was deeply affected by his nation's betrayals of its ideals of due process, equal treatment under the law and perquisites of citizenship.

Unlike most of his peers, however, Nakamura found an outlet to deal with the defining trauma he experienced as a child: filmmaking. Decades into adulthood, that resulted in his trippy, seminal experimental 1971 documentary "Manzanar," named for the War Relocation Authority Center where he spent part of his childhood after being born in the Venice area of Los Angeles. In 2022, "Manzanar" was added



Although Bob Nakamura became known for his motion pictures, earlier in his life, he had found employment as a still photographer and photojournalist.

PHOTO: ROBERT A. NAKAMURA (COURTESY OF "THIRD ACT" COPYRIGHT ROBERT A. NAKAMURA)

to the Library of Congress' National Film Registry.

Nakamura's filmography also includes "Wataridori: Birds of Passage," the drama "Hito Hata: Raise the Banner" (co-directed with Duane Kubo), "Fool's Dance," "Moving Memories," "Looking Like the Enemy" and "Toyo Miyatake: Infinite Shades of Gray," about the photographer who was also incarcerated at Manzanar and had famously smuggled in lenses and other camera parts to build a working camera to document life in camp from an inmate's perspective. ("Manzanar," "Wataridori" and "Hito Hata" can be viewed at tinyurl.com/4jd58xcz. "Looking Like the Enemy" can be viewed at tinyurl.com/5d4yypa7.)

When he was still a teenager in the 1950s, Nakamura found work as a freelance photojournalist for the *Los Angeles Examiner* and the International News Service. He went on to graduate from Art Center College of Design in 1966 and build a career as a success-

ful commercial photographer — seemingly achieving the American Dream.

The ferment of the era — the Civil Rights and Anti-War movements — and the unresolved psychic scars from Manzanar, however, pulled Nakamura in another direction. With Kubo, Eddie Wong and Alan Ohashi, he helped co-found the community-based nonprofit Asian American media organization Visual Communications, where Nakamura served as its founding director.

In 1975, Nakamura's pull toward academia began when he earned an MFA from the University of California Los Angeles' School of Theater, Film and Television. The association with UCLA would loom large in his future. As a grad student, he was part of the film school's Ethno-Communications Program. After becoming a film professor in 1987 at the UCLA TFT and an Asian American Studies professor in 1994, he would in 1996 revive the name as a teaching program.

According to UCLA, Nakamura nurtured future Asian American film talent that included such names as Akira Boch, Eurie Chung, John Esaki, Evan Leong, Justin Lin and Ali Wong.

The Japanese American National Museum was yet another community institution where Nakamura made an impact. He was among those in JANM's original advisory committee in 1985 and would later become the founder of its Frank H. Watase Media Arts Center, as well as the JANM Moving Image and Photographic Archive.

With Karen Ishizuka, his producing partner and wife of 46 years, JANM awarded Nakamura its inaugural JANM

Legacy Award in 2016 for their "their multiple contributions in filmmaking, advocating for the cultural and historical significance of home movies, documentation of community events and recording of oral histories."

"His legacy will endure in every story we tell," said JANM President and CEO Ann Burroughs.

Nakamura is survived by his wife, Karen L. Ishizuka; daughter, Thai Binh Etsuko Checél; and son, Tadashi Nakamura; brother, Norman Nakamura; daughters-in-law, Heather Wielgos and Cindy Sangalang Nakamura; and several grandchildren.

Plans for a public memorial are forthcoming. ■

News Briefs

After Past Presidents Endorse Ariz.'s SB 1301, Nat'l JACL Clarifies Stance

The National JACL released a statement June 17 regarding its position on the Arizona Legislature's SB 1301, which was introduced by state Sen. John Kavanagh and would require the teaching of Asian American Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander studies in state schools. JACL stated it "would not publicly support SB 1301" after consulting with the Arizona JACL chapter (see page 4 of this issue). The statement was released to "explain our decision not to support this particular effort" after a letter from five past JACL national presidents — Kenneth Inouye, David Kawamoto, Gary Mayeda, Floyd Mori and Jeffrey Moy — endorsing the bill was published on an Asian American news website. The JACL stated that it "fully supports the truthful teaching of AANHPI history; however, we believe this bill falls short of that standard. Upon further review of the bill and the context in which it has been introduced, we believe that SB 1301 will lead to the whitewashing of AANHPI history and the further erasure of marginalized voices." The JACL's statement may be viewed at tinyurl.com/ae26hek.

JANM Damns Signs at NPS Sites Asking Public to Report Critical Wording

After President Trump's March 27 Executive Order 14253, also known as "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History," the Japanese American National Museum condemned a new directive that went into effect late in the week of June 8. According to JANM, the National Park Service placed signs, which included a QR code, at California's Manzanar National Historic Site and Idaho's Minidoka National Historic Site asking the public to report language that may be deemed "critical of American History." The *Colorado Sun* news website reported similar signage having appeared at the Amache National Historic Site. "JANM is deeply disturbed by this new directive, especially at historical sites like Manzanar and Minidoka where Japanese Americans were unjustly incarcerated during World War II," said JANM President and CEO Ann Burroughs. The *Los Angeles Times* quoted National Parks Conservation Association Southern California Director Dennis Arguelles as saying, "These stories may not be flattering to American heritage, but they're an integral part of our history."

Historical Society of N.M. Taps JACler Nikki Nojima Louis for Award

The New Mexico JACL chapter member will receive the Edgar Lee Hewett award — named for the archaeologist/anthropologist who focused on Native Americans in the state — at the HSNM's Sept. 25-27 annual conference and awards banquet in Las Cruces. Nikki Nojima Louis was cited for "bringing awareness to the important history involving Japanese American incarceration during WWII in New Mexico."

Ireichō Books Road Trips to New York City, San Jose, Calif., Portland, Ore.

The Book of Names travels to NYC on Oct. 20-21, San Jose on Jan. 9-10, 2026, and Portland on March 6-8, 2026. Details at ireizo.org/tour/.

— P.C. Staff

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