

Never Give Up! Minoru Yasui and the Fight for Justice

A documentary by Holly Yasui and Will Doolittle.

Narrated by George Takei



This film relates the life history of an American hero. Minoru (Min) Yasui was born in Hood River, Oregon in 1916. He was the first Japanese American attorney in Oregon and during World War II, he initiated a legal test case by deliberately violating military orders that lead to the incarceration of over 110,000 persons of Japanese ancestry in U.S. concentration camps. He spent 9 months in solitary confinement awaiting his appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled against him. After the war, he moved to Denver and continued to defend the human and civil rights not only of Japanese Americans but for Blacks, Latinos, Native Americans, religious minorities, children and youth, the aged, low income people, etc. As Executive Director of the Denver Commission on Community Relations, he helped to initiate and oversaw a plethora of programs and organizations serving diverse communities. In the 1970s and 80s, he spearheaded the redress movement to win reparations and a formal apology from the government for the injustices against Japanese Americans during World War II. He also reopened his wartime case, and it was in appeal when died in 1986. He is buried in his hometown of Hood River, Oregon.

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December 7, 1941 is a day that will live in infamy – in part because of the reaction of the U.S. government to the bombing of Pearl Harbor against its own citizens of Japanese ancestry. One young man immediately protests – U.S. citizen by birthright and the first Japanese American attorney in Oregon, Minoru Yasui.

He purposely violates the first military order – a curfew – that lead to incarceration of over 110,000 persons of Japanese ancestry in concentration camps, in order to initiate a constitutional test case. He knows that any order discriminating against a citizen on the basis of ancestry is wrong. On the first night that the curfew takes effect, he walks the streets of Portland, Oregon, for hours. No law-enforcement official stops him. But he doesn't give up. He marches into the Police Headquarters with the Proclamation and his birth certificate, which he shows to the desk sergeant, and he demands to be arrested.

The policeman says “Go home sonny or else you’re going to get into trouble.”

But Min Yasui won't give up.

He talks the policeman into arresting him, and is finally thrown into jail.

Who is man, who has the courage to defy the most powerful government in the world, in the face of the extreme anti-Japanese sentiment stoked by the vengeful hatreds of war? He is the third son of immigrant parents, born and raised in the farming community of Hood River, Oregon. Encouraged by his father to “put down roots” in the soil of America, he helps to found a chapter of the patriotic Japanese American Citizens League (JACL); he serves in the Reserve Officer Training Corp; he admonishes younger Japanese American students to be 200% American. He is a patriot to the core; he believes in the principles of democracy and justice enshrined in the U.S. Constitution.

The military nonetheless posts “evacuation” orders and Min is taken, along with about 3,000 other persons of Japanese ancestry to the Portland Livestock Pavilion “Assembly Center,” and thereafter to the Minidoka concentration camp in the desert badlands of Idaho. When his case comes up for sentencing, he returns to Oregon and the U.S. District Court finds him guilty. He spends nine months in solitary confinement, awaiting the appeal of his case to the U.S. Supreme Court, which also rules against him. Released from jail, he is escorted back to the Minidoka, trading one prison for another.

But he doesn't give up. When he is released from Minidoka, he moves to Denver, Colorado where he studies for the state bar. He receives the highest score in the exam but is denied entry to the Colorado Bar because of his criminal record.

He won't give up. He appeals that ruling to the Colorado State Supreme Court and wins the right to practice law in the state. He marries True Shibata, and they have three daughters, Iris, Laurel and Holly.

In Denver, Min continues his fight for justice. His former secretary describes how as an attorney, he didn't charge or charged only nominal fees to his low-income clients. Working with the local, regional and national JACL, he lobbies against discriminatory Alien Land Laws in Colorado, and for federal legislation to make claims against the government for receipted property losses during the forced “evacuation” of Japanese Americans; and immigration reform to allow Asians to become naturalized U.S. citizens.

His defense of human and civil rights is not only for Japanese Americans, but for all Americans. He helps to found the Denver Urban League, the Latin American Research and Service Agency, Denver Native Americans United; he chairs the Denver Opportunity “War on Poverty” program and leads a multiracial Boy Scout Troop. He serves on the board of the Denver Red Cross and YMCA, and on advisory committees for the Denver Public Schools which his children attend.

The number of pro-bono hours that he donates to community organizations is staggering. In recognition of this, the Minoru Yasui Community Volunteer Award is named after him, and continues to this day in Denver to honor outstanding volunteers every month.

As Executive Director of the Denver Commission on Community Relations, Min initiates and manages a plethora of programs for ethnic and religious minorities, children and youth, senior citizens, low-income people, fledgling businesses, refugees, ex-convicts like himself! as well as cultural and arts organizations, and national and international exchange programs. His former staff remember him as a man who was totally committed to his work; demanding but fair; giving people the opportunity to change their lives.

Though Min Yasui works day and night, he is also a loving father, teaching his daughters to read and write, taking them on road trips during the summer and to the mountains even in the winter, playing cards on weekend nights, making sukiyaki on special occasions at home.

During the last years of his life, Min dedicates himself heart and soul to the redress movement, seeking an official apology and reparations for the injustices perpetrated against Japanese Americans during World War II. He criss-crosses the country attending hundreds of meetings, making hundreds of speeches, writing thousands of letters, reports and articles.

When researchers discover evidence that the U.S. government falsified evidence in his World War II trial, Min re-opens his legal case along with two other litigants, Fred Korematsu and Gordon Hirabayashi. That re-opened case is still in appeal when he dies. But as his attorney says, HE NEVER GAVE UP ... and his legacy lives on.

The Civil Liberties Act of 1988 grants reparations of \$20,000 to all survivors of the U.S. concentration camps. An city office building is named after him in Denver, and American Inn of Court bears his name; a Voices of Change Award is established in Portland, and statues of Min Yasui grace Sakura Square in Denver and the Public Library in Hood River.

Min Yasui is buried in his beloved hometown of Hood River, Oregon.