

So That They Won't Be Forgotten

It's a drizzly, wet morning on an early spring day. Most people would be inside, enjoying a day off from work or school, maybe binge-watching their favorite TV shows, but I'm at the entrance to Portland's historical Lone Fir Cemetery, holding a bouquet of flowers. I shiver and pull my coat tighter around myself. It's not terribly cold, but the rain seems to make it colder. I walk through the different blocks at the cemetery, passing many graves, the large memorials dedicated to famous people, the gravestones so sunken and weathered as to be nothing more than rocks, those of Christians, Jews, Japanese, Russians, rich, poor, soldiers, children... and then nothing. I'm standing in front of Block 14, where there are no gravestones, but I know that this is the final resting place for many Chinese workers whose work helped build prosperity in a country that often failed to show appreciation, as well as patients of the Hawthorne Asylum.

I gaze sadly at the empty lot, all those people who suffered discrimination in their lives and then were simply erased and eventually forgotten. It has been this way throughout most of human history, where people have been judged and treated differently just because of the color of their skin or some other characteristic. Nowadays, thanks to many dedicated people who worked tirelessly for what they believed, we live in a society where everyone has equal rights, no matter their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or religion, at least under the law. Nevertheless, constant attention from each of us is required to keep us from sliding back to the darker side of human nature. It is all too easy for our laws and ideals to be ignored and become nothing but a fig leaf, and it takes people of conviction to stand up for what is just.

One such person was Minoru Yasui. After Pearl Harbor was attacked by Japan, people of Japanese ancestry were heavily discriminated against, beginning with exclusion zones and racial curfews, and eventually forcefully relocating hundreds of thousands of them to concentration camps.

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Minoru Yasui intentionally violated the curfew and turned himself in in order to test the constitutionality of the military-imposed ethnic curfews. This earned him a year in prison, a \$5,000 fine, and a loss of citizenship. He took his case all the way to the Supreme Court. While they affirmed that he was in fact a US citizen, the Court ruled unanimously that the curfews were justified by “military necessity.” Believing in principle that people should be treated equally, Yasui never gave up. In the 80’s, he petitioned the Court to reopen his case, although unfortunately he passed away before they could take it up, making the issue moot. As a lifelong civil rights advocate, Minoru Yasui not only fought for his own race, but also for many other marginalized communities, helping them to address racism and other social problems. [Franklin, Nagae]

Living in Oregon from where Minoru Yasui was born, I have known his story for a long time, and I always find it inspiring. While not everyone may take such great risks to challenge injustices directly, we should all keep alive the memories of the victims of mistakes made in the past, so we do not repeat them. Recently, I have joined the cause in this way. One of my successes involved the Lone Fir Cemetery – specifically Block 14, where I’m standing now, where two groups of historically marginalized people were sheltered beneath.

Dr. James Hawthorne and his hospital, the Oregon Hospital for the Insane, is an important part of Oregon history. Known for his humanity, Dr. Hawthorne paid to bury hundreds of his asylum patients, not only those with mental illness, but also those whose families were absent, or were in poverty, physically disabled, or with behavior not accepted by society. [Mata, McCurdy]

Meanwhile, an estimated fifteen thousand Chinese workers were hired by US companies, and were instrumental in building much of the infrastructure and economy of the West Coast, including the western part of the Transcontinental Railroad. They often faced harsh weather and dangerous working

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conditions, suffering nearly a 10% fatality rate. These Chinese laborers received lower wages than Europeans for the same work. While tools, room and board were provided to other workers, Chinese workers had to live in tents, and pay for their tools and food. [PBS]

Block 14 was purchased by the City and Suburban Railway to bury its deceased Chinese workers, those who built much of the railroads, and later the Portland seawall and other infrastructure. More than eleven hundred Chinese workers were once buried at Block 14, where most lay until their bodies could be sent back to their home villages in China. [Mata, Metro] However, for many, especially women and children, Block 14 became their permanent resting place, along with hundreds of patients of the Hawthorne Asylum.

The graves of the asylum patients were marked with wood, and they were destroyed in a fire and by weathering. Later, the gravestones of the Chinese workers were broken up to make a retaining wall around the cemetery, leaving Block 14 completely bare. In 1952, Multnomah County built the Morrison building on the land. The building had deteriorated after half a century, and the county had intention to sell the land for development. Concerns were raised by multiple groups, so in 2005, an archaeological survey was conducted and human remains were discovered. In 2007, Block 14 was transferred to Metro, reconnecting it with the rest of the cemetery. [Metro (both)] Plans were made for a cultural heritage garden that would honor both groups that were buried there. The garden design was done in 1998. However, due to a lack of funding and staff turnover, the project stalled.

Then, in 2019, Oregon Metro passed a parks and nature bond measure, which would prioritize projects that promoted diversity. While it was listed in the bond, the cultural heritage garden was left off of the discussion list, so the Lone Fir Cemetery Foundation reached out. I was the first to respond to the call. I wrote a sample letter to Oregon Metro and sent it to some social groups I was in, sparking

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a letter-writing campaign. Because of this, twenty-five other students wrote their own letters. Our campaign was a success, and Metro allocated \$4 million to the garden. [Wallace]

Lone Fir Cemetery Foundation's two-decade dream is becoming a reality. This is a project long overdue. Those who had been forgotten at Block 14 would be honored. I'm still involved in the project, coming up with ideas for how to incorporate cultural elements into the design. However, diversity comes in many forms, not just racial diversity. Having been born with high-functioning autism, I know the struggles of those with mental disabilities, which is why mental health and disabilities is also a primary focus of my advocacy work. Another one of my accomplishments, with the help of other Beaverton students, was convincing the city of Beaverton to reinstate the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Technical Advisory Committee, on which I now serve.

Racism and discrimination are still problems, and they may always be problems to some extent. Not only that, but recent developments have brought the issues of war, totalitarianism, homophobia, and the mental health crisis into the spotlight. Sometimes I find it so frustrating that I want to scream at everything that is still wrong in this world, but I always remind myself that now is a better time than ever to be alive, thanks to the hard work and dedication of many tireless advocates who fought for what was right. The struggle is still ongoing, and we are coming closer to an equitable world every day. I know that I will do my part in ensuring that the world I leave behind will be better than the one I entered.

I bend down and stick the bouquet upright on the ground. The rain has stopped now, the thick clouds quickly breaking apart, letting in the sun, illuminating millions of tiny water droplets, and the world seems to shimmer and sparkle like a dream. "Rest in peace," I whisper. "Trust us to remember your stories, so nothing like this can happen again."

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