

My Grandmother Yoko McClain

My grandmother, Yoko Matsuoka McClain, the granddaughter of Natsume Soseki, was born on January 1st 1924 in Tokyo Japan. She was born in a prewar Japan where her family enjoyed many luxuries such as department stores, escalators, and even several maids. When Japan started their war on China, the maids started to leave one by one, and as a result she and her mother had to learn to cook and to do all the cleaning. She says in a book, “If there had not been a war, I might still be dependent on others and unable to take care of myself like most other prewar upper-middle class women” (McClain, Yoko). She enjoyed studying English so she was encouraged by her mother to attend Tsuda College, a women’s school. While attending school, World War II started, and the students had to contribute to the war effort by working in a factory to produce parts. They suffered during those times from constant hunger and the horrors of war and became mentally strong. After the war, she found work as a translator, but then learned to become a dressmaker for better pay. This served her well later as she made her own dresses in college to save money. She took an exam to win a scholarship to a university in America, and succeeded. Although she knew almost nothing about the country, she quickly adapted to the new environment and made many lifelong friends whose families we are still in touch with. After her allotted year had expired, she was encouraged by a friend to go to a Quaker house in Chicago to make money over the summer and also to see more parts of the country. She also received a sponsorship to stay in the country from a successful Japanese-American doctor, Robert H. Shiomi, and she then obtained a scholarship to the University of Oregon. She found a job at the Museum of Oriental Art (now the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art), but also took other positions

because of low pay. She earned a Bachelors' degree in French and then married her husband whom she had met at the museum. Because her parents could not travel all the way across the Pacific Ocean, Dr. Shiomi served as her father at her wedding.

Her husband, my grandfather Bob, was soon drafted into the army and sent to Germany, and my grandmother went along with him. They spent a year there, and my grandmother was able to practice the German she learned at University. A few months before he would be discharged, my grandfather was informed that the unit was going to Georgia where interracial marriages were prohibited, and so he was discharged early. This came as a surprise to my grandmother because she had never considered their marriage might not have been accepted. She also mentioned in the book that although people asked her if she had faced any prejudice while living in the country, she had experienced none.

She next became certified to teach French so that no matter where they were she could find a job. While pregnant, she still worked as a secretary at the museum until the day she went into labor and remained close with the museum even after she stopped working there. After my father was born, she took a few months off and it was the first time she had not attended school or held a job since the year in Germany. For the next few years she "studied, taught, and did domestic chores, while raising a child, but no matter how busy I was, I felt my life was full and I enjoyed every aspect of it" (McClain, Yoko). After earning a graduate degree, she got a full time teaching position teaching Japanese at the University of Oregon. At the urging of her students, she published a book on modern Japanese grammar that was sold in many countries. She went on to publish other books in Japanese that were also well received. Finally after 30 years of teaching Japanese language, she decided to retire in 1994. Since that time, she visited all 7 continents, wrote a few more books, and gave talks around the world. It was interesting to see how a one

year scholarship to an American university turned into a 59 year stay. My grandmother sadly passed away in November of 2011.

As my grandmother mentioned in one of the books she was part of, she served as a “cultural bridge between the two countries [Japan and the USA]” (McClain, Yoko). Some of the social and cultural contributions she gave to the world were her trips taking 15 students a year from Oregon to Japanese universities, as well as also educating Japanese people on American culture. In addition she traveled around the country to teach graduate students who later became professors, and grew the Japanese department at the U of O. Later in her life she was also an important donor to the Jordan Schnitzer museum. Although she may not have had the political and economic impacts that Minoru Yasui was responsible for, she helped many people on both sides of the Pacific Ocean learn about new cultures and promote cultural exchange (McClain, Alejandro). However something she had in common with Yasui is that they were both able to adapt very quickly. According to an online source, Yasui graduated from college as a lawyer but after not being able to find work as one, took a position as a speechwriter. When the war started, he attempted to enlist in the Army and after being denied 9 times he decided to take matters into his own hands to protest the unfair Executive order 9066. He eventually took his appeal of the curfew all the way to the Supreme Court but ultimately lost. After serving his sentence, he passed the bar exam and opened his own practice and fought discrimination the rest of his life (Asakawa). My grandmother similarly had to make pivots her whole life such as working in a factory while studying in college, becoming a dressmaker out of necessity, immigrating to the United States, learning various languages and jobs, and finally juggling raising a child, a job and

going to school. She also dedicated most of her life to helping her students and others all around the world.

I believe at the foundation of the United States is the hard work of immigrants, therefore they should all be welcomed and given opportunities to succeed. Both sides of my family immigrated to the United States and I am of the first generation on my mom's side of the family to be born in the US. As a high school student, I don't see as many newcomers in my school, but I know that there are a few foreign exchange students. Some ways I know I can help newcomers have an easier transition are first of all become their friend and be someone they can count on. I can show them around, introduce them to my classmates, and be there to answer any questions they have. Secondly I can take it upon myself to learn about the culture of the newcomer to understand them better and to have a stronger connection. Finally, in my own community, I would educate my own peers on tolerance and acceptance because it is something I know our nation struggles with and students need to learn these skills before going out into the real world. This will really help newcomers feel safe and welcome if the environment is exactly that. I felt inspired by Yasui's work because of how he did not just help his own community but he also was an advocate for the black community. An online article also mentioned how Islamophobia and the anti-Muslim sentiment would have been something he would have surely fought for (Minoru). With the strategies I listed I believe that I can make newcomers feel like they can succeed in this country and have the support they need.

Works Cited

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