How Don Nakanishi Overcame Prejudice in the Academy

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Abstract
Alan Ruby remembers a pioneer of Asian American studies.

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Earlier this month my wife and I were honorary pallbearers at the funeral of a long-time friend, Don Nakanishi, former director of the Asian American Studies Center at the University of California, Los Angeles. At the Hompa Hongwanji Buddhist temple in LA we reflected, offered incense, bowed to the family and heard tributes to his work as an educator and community activist.

Don’s achievements were many. He was a pioneer of Asian American studies; his main research topic was the political participation of Asian Americans and other ethnic groups. He founded a journal and led academic associations and served his community nationally and locally. Don was appointed by President Clinton to the board of the Civil Liberties Public Education Fund. He helped establish the Barrio Free Health Clinic which evolved into a world-class affordable healthcare service for 150,000 families in Latino and low-income communities in Southern California.

His life of service and scholarship had humble beginnings and more than a few challenges. Don’s parents were interned during the Second World War in a concentration camp in Poston, Arizona as part of the mass jailing of 120,000 Japanese Americans. After their release they had little to start afresh in Boyle Heights, a largely Latino community in East LA, where Don was born. He went to Roosevelt High in the neighbourhood, was elected student body president and graduated well enough to get into Yale University in 1966. He was one of 10 minority students in a class of 1,000 young men. Two others were Chicano friends from East LA and they soon discovered that the nearest decent Mexican food was above 125th Street in Manhattan and that canned tortillas, all that was available in New Haven, were especially unappetising. He started as a pre-med student and Doug, his laboratory partner, a good foot taller than Don, wept as he spoke of their friendship which endured across 50 years.

Don’s first year at Yale was not easy: he felt isolated and marginalised. His dorm mates, with that brash insensitivity of privileged adolescents, celebrated Pearl Harbor day by water-bombing him, shouting “banzai” while one of them recited Franklin Roosevelt’s declaration of war on Japan. Puzzled, not sure if it was a bad joke or a fraternity prank, Don went to Yale library to borrow his first political science book – a study of the events and political acts that culminated in the internment of his parents and thousands of other citizens. He graduated in political science and went onto earn his doctorate at Harvard and then to a tenure-track position in UCLA’s graduate school of education. In 1986 his case for tenure and promotion was denied. Some claimed it was a payback for his research on the drop in UCLA’s admission rates for Asian Americans in the mid 1980s; others pointed out that accepting a post to create an interdisciplinary centre was a “high risk” path to tenure, as was pursuing political science topics while holding an education school post.

Don litigated the decision on the grounds of “political and racial bias”. Students demonstrated in support and the Japanese American community campaigned on his behalf, helping fund his legal costs. A faculty review panel found flaws in the initial process leading a second round with a panel that now included a scholar familiar with Don’s field of research. The case dragged on until the UCLA chancellor ruled in his favour in May 1989.
Within a year Don was appointed director of the Asian American Studies Center, and he served until his retirement from UCLA. In that time he led national efforts to establish Asian American studies as a legitimate and respected field of scholarship. He mentored and developed successive cohorts of scholars and activists, published widely and remained active in the community.

Mindful of his undergraduate experience he spent hours interviewing applicants for admission to Yale, many from West Coast communities like Boyle Heights and many from families with no experience of higher education. For his service to Yale, he was awarded the Yale Medal in 2008. The citation included reference to his role in establishing the first Asian American students association. But the first organisation that Don joined at Yale was the Mexican American students association. It fitted well enough with childhood but there was also an element of practicality. As his friend Carlos explained to me some years ago, “we needed three or five members to register an association and we were one real Chicano short, so Don was a welcome founding member”.

Don’s approach to academic and community service was a mixture of practicality, persistence and principle. His story reminds us of how much education can do to help less privileged young people create better lives for themselves. It also illustrates that colleges and universities can be unfriendly places where prejudice and bigotry stifle those who look different or hold different beliefs. And, perhaps most importantly, Don’s achievements show that change is possible, especially when led by those with generous hearts who are willing to work across intellectual, social, ethnic and religious borders.

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