

YASU

In November of 1996 we sponsored an evening in Tribute to the Reverend Seiichi Michael Yasutake. Yasu, as we affectionately called him, was 76 years old and would live until almost 2002. His health was good, and his mind was clear. We just wanted to honor this amazing person in our midst. He was an Episcopalian priest and the Executive Director of the Interfaith Prisoners of Conscience Project, the purpose of which was to monitor the human rights of political prisoners and mobilize support in church and society for their release. (The following link is to the program of the Tribute: http://www.freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC3_scans/3.tribute.seiichi.michael.yasutake.1996.pdf)

We had been working alongside Yasu for more than ten years. He was a consistent, persistent, tenacious and active presence in the struggle to free the Puerto Rican political prisoners and all other political prisoners, and an outspoken voice on behalf of the human rights struggles of all people. Of late, Steve and I had gotten to know Yasu more personally, and had shared several Japanese meals together and a few rounds of sake. Not one to speak of himself generally, we slowly came to know Yasu's wondrous story. When we decided to organize the Tribute, we set about putting together a slide show of his life, and in order to prepare, we spent even more time with Yasu and his wife Ruth, talking to them about their life together.

Although born in Seattle in 1920, Mike was sent to live with his grandparents in Japan from age 3 until 7, when he returned to the U.S. In 1920 Mike's parents purchased a house in Seattle in his name. The house could not be in their names since they were not U.S. citizens. Not knowing any English, Mike struggled through elementary school and high school before returning once

again to Japan where he studied kendo, a form of Japanese fencing, and became a fifth degree black belt. Returning to the U.S. the year World War II broke out, he and the entire family were sent to the internment camps. In Yasu's words, "We could not take anything except what we could carry in our hands. We were moved to Minidoka, Idaho by broken down trains with the shades pulled down. They wouldn't let us see where we were going, so we could have been going to the gas chambers, as far as we knew. . . . They were drafting people for the war right there in the camps. There were several hundred who resisted the draft, and 66 of them got sent to prison. So, these men said 'I'm not going. Hell no, I won't go' way before Viet Nam."

Released from the camps in 1943, Yasu entered college in Cincinnati, and as his wife Ruth notes, "Mike got into trouble everywhere he went." In Ohio, at the draftable age of 23, a federal agent came to interrogate him on his loyalty. The controversial loyalty oath demanded that the Japanese and Japanese-Americans "forswear allegiance to the emperor of Japan" and promise to take up arms to defend this country. Yasu told the agents that he had never sworn allegiance to the emperor in the first place and therefore should not have to sign that part of the oath, and furthermore, he was opposed to war and would not bear arms. Yasu was expelled from the University at a time when "7000 people were sent out of the U.S. to Japan because they 'incorrectly' answered the loyalty oath, according to Yasu. He went on to attend Boston University and seminary, and was ordained an Episcopalian minister in 1950.

A year later, he and Ruth Tahara, a registered nurse, were married. His first job, from 1953 to 1963, was working as pastor in the all-white suburb of Oak Lawn, Illinois. Although they were eventually named "Oak Lawn's Family of the Year," Yasu quipped that the only place he and

Ruth were allowed to live was in property owned by the church. After raising money to build a church, rectory and counseling center, Mike turned his attention to the issue of open housing in Oak Lawn, trying to bring in people of color to live there.

Moving to Evanston in the 1960s Yasu became the Regional Campus Minister for five midwestern states. In that capacity, he worked with students seeking justice. When the three civil rights workers, Goodman, Schwerner and Chaney, were murdered in Mississippi, Yasu and a group of his students went there to help register voters. The house he was living in was blown up, although as Mike noted as if to suggest that it was no big deal, “not while I was in it.” Mike and his students were given an air conditioned car because it was thought that if they kept the windows closed they stood less of a chance of being killed. Upon return to Chicago, Yasu continued to fight for open housing in Chicago’s all white and wealthy North Shore. He marched with Dr. King and thousands of others, and also began to support draft resisters. Yasu wrote an amazing 10-page single-spaced memo summarizing his one-person trip across the U.S. visiting imprisoned war resisters and generating support for them wherever he went. This frightened his superiors, and by 1971 he was fired. He then began working at the YMCA Community College in the Counseling office.

In 1976, a young woman named Carmen Valentin applied for a job at the Counseling Office. A young Puerto Rican, she had been a teacher at Tuley High School (now named Clemente High) but had been fired for protesting the racism there. Yasu checked her credentials and found them to be excellent. “I figured that if a person was not in the storm of controversy in a very bad situation like that, then the counselor would not be worth very much,” recalled Yasu. So he hired

Carmen, and they worked together on various projects, including the defense of Iranian students who were being attacked for protesting against the Shah of Iran. Together they organized a teacher's union of which Yasu was elected president, even though he wasn't a teacher. As president he campaigned to bring the secretaries into the union, a battle he did not win. In 1980, Carmen was arrested along with ten other people for being members of the Puerto Rican FALN. Her imprisonment alerted Yasu to the issue of political prisoners in the U.S.

In his "spare time" Yasu earned a Ph.D. in counseling and psychology at the School of Education at Loyola University. Then in 1981 he took a job as Director of Counseling at the Cathedral Shelter. Several years later he hired another *independentista*, Dora Garcia, who was arrested within a year, and Yasu was fired shortly thereafter. After that he had difficulty finding a job. "We could have plastered the bathroom with all those rejection notices. We should have had them laminated," Ruth laughed. So Yasu "retired", an odd term when applied to someone who worked 100 hours a week. He was a tireless friend of political prisoners, probably visiting more political prisoners than any other individual in the U.S. He was a motivating force behind Can't Jail The Spirit, (collection of political prisoner biographies) and an essential fundraiser for the project. He also fought continuously against control unit prisons, traveling to Marion to visit prisoners, demonstrate and argue with the warden. He traveled to Washington to protest to the Bureau of Prisons, the Justice Department, and Congress. A passionate supporter of the Puerto Rican anti-colonial struggle, Yasu was also the chair of the U.S.-Japan Committee for Racial Justice, and opposed the forced finger printing of Koreans who live in Japan. He struggled to get the U.S. and Japan out of Okinawa and fought in support of the sovereignty of Hawaii. He was

active in the Chicago Japanese American Citizens League Human Rights Committee, the Episcopal Peace Fellowship, Kairos, and the Coalition Against Police Torture and Brutality.

Yasu was also a family man-- husband to Ruth, brother to Mitsuye Yamada, Joe and Tosh, father to his three children and grandfather to seven. He was the first to recognize Ruth, a full-time elementary school teacher, as the key organizer of family affairs, making it possible for him to engage in a multitude of activities.

Yasu understood the need to resist social injustice, and he also had an appreciation of the personal cost that often follows from confronting authority. He did all he could to help minimize that cost. He was exemplary in demonstrating the true potential of human beings to be dignified, productive and loving members of an international community.