GFBNEC is dedicated to providing educational opportunities on the World War II Japanese American veteran story. Our annual student essay and poetry contest gives students around the world the chance not only to learn more about that story, but to connect with it on a personal level. By engaging students with this history, we ensure the next generation remembers the courage and sacrifice of the World War II American veterans of Japanese ancestry.

This year’s prompts included:

• The Japanese American WWII veteran experience is still relevant to our society today. Explore one of the ways this is true.

• One goal of GFBNEC is to inspire new generations to embody the Japanese American veterans’ core values of courage, sacrifice, equality, humility and patriotism. How has the Nisei veterans’ story impacted your life, identity and/or values? How do you embody any or each of these values?

CONTEST JUDGES

The 2021 High School and College Essay and Poetry Contest would not be successful without the generous support from our contest judges. We thank each judge for their time and expertise!

Karen Ageno  Emiko Kranz  Nancy Sagawa
Mary Jane Fujimura  Elizabeth Kato  Jo Ann Takemoto
Alan Hino  Kent Marume  Staci Toji
Audrey Ishimoto  Clarice Miyamoto-Kim  Linton Yee

CONTEST SPONSORS

Pacific Global Investment Management in memory of Manabi Hirasaki and Sig Kagawa

Ken and June Shimabukuro

Anonymous donor in memory of WWII veteran Masao “Mas” Takahashi
CONGRATULATIONS TO ALL 2021 STUDENT CONTEST WINNERS!

HIGH SCHOOL

ESSAY

First Place: Daniel Thomas
Their Legacy Marches On

Second Place: Kai Vanderlip
Reflection of the WWII Incarceration in Comparison with Today’s Society

Third Place: Troy Miyazato
The World Through My Lens

POETRY

First Place: Trisha Tanaka
A Symbol of Pride

Second Place: Malina Miura
The Will to Fight

Third Place: Sophia Esperitu
A Modest Man

COLLEGE

ESSAY

First Place: Ashley Tanaka
Service, Identity, and Purpose: What the Nisei Veterans Taught Me

Second Place: Jared Frederick
Fight for the Right: The Power and Relevance of the Japanese American WWII Veteran Experience

Third Place: Juliet Bost
Living A Legacy of Perseverance and Courage
Their Legacy Marches On

“Being a soldier is more than courage. It is sacrificing yourself for something greater than yourself” (Anonymous). During WW2, Nisei veterans voluntarily risked their lives. This decision was extraordinary, considering the internment of many Japanese Americans, as well as the bitter vitriol and racial discrimination that many of them faced. But, against the odds, they fought with an unseen tenacity and unmatched valor, proving their worth many times over. As a first-generation Japanese-American, I have often wrestled with my identity, my sense of self. However, when I discovered the 442nd, they spoke to me in a way nobody else could. They too had to struggle with their identity. They were caught in a crossfire between their own nation and foreign enemy powers. I felt inspired to follow in their footsteps as soldiers.

Consequently, I have been preparing for the day that I myself will swear to support and defend our Constitution. I know that I will face many trials and tribulations by choosing this path, but the 442nd faced far greater opposition than I ever will. When told to rescue a battalion behind fortified enemy lines, they did not hesitate. Thanks to their selfless heroism, they succeeded, and despite being exhausted, they found the strength to continue fighting. They assaulted the Gothic Line, German fortifications built and defended by Generalfeldmarschall Kesselring himself. The assault was originally intended as a diversion, but the Nisei fought with such ferocity that ultimately it became an offensive. Knowing that they overcame such incredible odds gives me the confidence and courage to continue working towards my own goals. That is what motivated me to apply to the service academies and challenge myself to reach new heights. No matter how intimidating it may seem, no matter how demanding, no matter how painful, I will face each day with an unquenchable thirst to succeed. Just as the 442nd did.

The Nisei knew they might face death if they chose to join the military, and I too know there is a distinct possibility that I may die. I am terrified of death. Yet I believe that, “Courage is not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it” (Nelson Mandela). By choosing to serve our country, I know that I will have to accept grueling physical trials, relocation, lack of sleep, and the loss of my own political voice. My predecessors sacrificed so much that what is asked of me seems little in comparison. I want to honor their memory, and repay this nation for all the opportunities that it has given to me. I also know that not everyone has been as fortunate as I have been and that inequalities still remain. There is much to improve on, and at times our nation may seem fractured and our future uncertain. Nevertheless, the Nisei believed that our nation could be better, and they bet their lives on it. They were ready to “Go For Broke”. I am prepared to do the same.

First Place: **DANIEL THOMAS**
Fox Chapel Area High School; Pittsburgh, PA
Grade 11 (2020-2021 academic year)

Daniel is a senior at Fox Chapel Area High School in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania where he enjoys studying history and biology. He is a brass captain for the marching band and he has also written for the Fox Chapel Rotary Club and he works for the school’s “Tapestry” magazine. Outside of school, he is a member of the Butler County Civil Air Patrol and he has studied the piano since the age of five.

One of my greatest inspirations to apply to join the military was the story of the 442nd, and the extraordinary courage, commitment, and sacrifice of its men. While further researching the 442nd connection with my college applications, I discovered the Go For Broke National Education Center and the goal of keeping the story of the Nisei soldiers alive spoke to me. My hope is to follow in the footsteps of the 422nd, and I aspire to emulate their heroism.

**Their Legacy Marches On**
Reflection of the WWII Incarceration in Comparison with Today’s Society

Thousands and thousands of families, ripped apart at their seams, divided and scattered to the most desolate reaches of America. Roughly 80 years ago President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, causing innocent men, women, and children to have their lives shattered, as they were forced out of their homes and into concentration camps. America was at war with Japan, and they called us enemy. Despite most people being registered U.S. citizens and having little to no ties to Japan, a deadly concoction of fear and racism caused their government, neighbors, and even friends to lash out. The incarcerated were Americans, and their country had betrayed them. Even with this betrayal, many Japanese Americans wanted to fight to protect our freedom, against Japan. Those who chose to do this were forced to fight a battle on two fronts, against the Axis powers abroad focused on destroying our democracy, and against institutional racism at home, embedded in the very democracy they would be sacrificing their lives protecting.

During WWII, my great-grandfather, Benjamin Tashiro, was one of those soldiers fighting a war on two fronts. He served in the MIS and to be honest, I don’t know much about what he did. He died before I was born and was conservative about sharing war time stories. He, like most of the Nisei, found it a shameful time to talk about, as pride was an enormous part of the Nisei generation. Listening to a tape recording of his autobiography with a Walkman, I realized he made no mention of WWII. I’ve read letters he wrote to his brother, who was imprisoned in Tule Lake, and letters he wrote asking for his brother and brother-in-law to be freed. Reading these, I can only imagine the conflict he must have felt. After the war he was eventually appointed by President Eisenhower as 5th Circuit Judge of Hawai’i for Kauai. With his love and passion for the law, it seems like an indescribable pain for him to endure, for the core values our justice system are built on; the constitutional amendments, to be violated for his family.

I could write how his experience of being forced away from his loved ones is relevant today because a similar thing happened to me in quarantine, but that doesn’t seem fair. There truly isn’t a way for our generation to imagine the true pain that the Nisei veterans went through. Times are similar, Japanese, and other Asian Americans are forced to fight a war on two fronts, one against a deadly virus and another versus systemic racism. However, it seems impossible to match the trauma the incarceration inflicted on those affected by it. We can take away messages from the Nisei experience to use today. We all must stick together to overcome the adversity of systemic racism and be the allies for each other the Japanese Americans desperately needed.

Second Place: **KAI VANDERLIP**
Tesla STEM High School; Redmond, WA
Grade 10 (2020-2021 academic year)

Kai is Gosei with family from Kauai, Hawai’i, who is passionate about pursuing studies of Law and Psychology. Dedicated to his community, Kai donates time to his neighborhood food drive and Kirkland Youth Council, is active on his high school’s Equity Board, the Debate Team, and serves as a swim instructor for the city pool. Kai enjoys playing Dungeons & Dragons, practicing Taekwondo, and spending time with friends.

I entered this contest to use my love of writing to spread awareness on a subject I’ve been interested in researching since 5th grade. Because of my fascination with law, the Japanese American incarceration has always been a focal point of my studies as it was an atrocious violation of our constitutional rights and harmed my family. To further my research, I founded a literature project which will add picture books about the incarceration, helping to diversify every elementary school library in my district. The purpose is to educate students from a young age about the civil rights violations that were unjustly enforced upon American citizens of Japanese descent so they can grow up to be more knowledgeable and open-minded individuals who can spot and speak out against intolerance of all forms.
He is Mr. Ken Akune, a World War II Veteran of the Military Intelligence Service. For my 5th Grade history project, I was honored to visit Mr. Akune at his home in Gardena and hear his story of him and his brother Harry fighting for the United States Military and his youngest brothers Saburo and Shiro fighting against them for the Japanese Navy.

He is Mr. Don Miyada, a World War II Veteran of the 100th Infantry Battalion. As a student volunteer for Go For Broke, my project entails interview transcriptions as well as reading interviews of World War II Veterans and selecting memorable quotes. Mr. Miyada talked about the battalion’s dangerous climb up the steep cliff in silence at night and finally penetrating the Gothic Line that the Germans held in Northern Italy, which eventually led to their surrender on May 2, 1945.

He is Mr. Yoshio Nakamura, a World War II Veteran of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. During the 2019 Go For Broke Evening of Aloha Dinner, I was blessed to accompany my father and escort Veterans to and from the event, pushing wheelchairs around and conversing with them. When I met Mr. Nakamura, I thanked him for his service and sacrifice, but surprisingly, he humbly thanked me for taking the time to volunteer and talk to him.

These are all courageous and patriotic men who I have had the pleasure of meeting or reading about. In my world, they are all my heroes. Unfortunately, to others, they are merely generic, old Asian men who deserve no respect. The recent Asian American hate crimes, especially against the elderly, has been a catalyst for me to reflect on how important our history is, and to recognize the contributions that our elderly citizens have made to our country. As a student volunteer for Go For Broke National Education Center and reading countless stories of heroism by our WWII Nisei Veterans, I felt compelled to share my feelings and spread awareness of their courage and selflessness.

The World Through My Lens

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These are all courageous and patriotic men who I have had the pleasure of meeting or reading about. In my world, they are all my heroes. Unfortunately, to others, they are merely generic, old Asian men who deserve no respect. The recent hate crimes against Asian Americans and especially against the elderly Asians have me questioning, “Why”? Our vulnerable elderly Asians are being taunted, attacked, and even murdered for being Asian. I am deeply saddened by the callous attitude the perpetrators have towards the helpless elderly victims. These recent incidents have been a catalyst for me to reflect on how important our history is, and to recognize the contributions that our elderly citizens have made.

Our country is at a tipping point, and how we deal with this issue now will steer the direction of our country for generations to come. During WWII, Japanese Americans were interned in camps and labeled “Enemy Aliens.” Despite facing this discrimination, an estimated 33,000 Japanese Americans offered their lives to serve in the United States Military to prove that they were loyal American citizens. Their brave actions helped erase discrimination for not only Japanese Americans but other Asian Americans. We must embody the same type of strong resolve and act valiantly to fight our current injustice. By learning about our Asian American history, we are able to share stories with people across the country, like the Japanese American WWII Veterans’ experience, so that their unique individualized experiences are recognized for shaping the fabric of our country. Only then can we start to respect each other and slowly begin stopping the hatred that persists in our country.
Go For Broke are the words I hear in my head
When I take a leap of faith
Words of my people who risked everything
For a country that thought they were nothing

Go For Broke, my symbol of patriotism
From the 442nd infantry
Who faced immeasurable challenges
To fight for what they believed in

Go For Broke symbolizes my American-ness
Showing that I can fight as well
No matter what obstacles come in my way
I have everything to prove

Go For Broke is a reminder
Of the immeasurable courage of the people
Who were as ready to fight
Just as much as the rest of America

Go For Broke is a source of pride and courage
For the underestimated
For America
For me.

A Symbol of Pride

Trisha Tanaka is a very driven individual who is constantly working towards improving her work and who she is as a person. She really enjoys learning new things and taking inspiration from her family, friends, and the world around her. In her free time, Trisha enjoys reading, spending time with her family, and creating clay miniatures.

Growing up as a sansei in America, I’ve always felt a little bit of a disconnect from my Japanese heritage and have struggled with feeling fully “American”. The stories of the Nisei soldiers who put their life on the line for the country reminds me that my heritage does not have to be separate—there is a lot of pride in being a Japanese American. Learning about the 442nd infantry and how they persevered, despite being underestimated, encourages me to continue to try my best and strive for excellence no matter what my peers may think.

First Place: TRISHA TANAKA
Gabrielino High School; San Gabriel, CA
Grade 11 (2020-2021 academic year)

High School Poetry Winners
Discriminated against in their own community
And unwanted as soldiers in their own country

Fear swept the nation
People afraid Japanese-Americans would betray
The very country they called home

Being removed from their own communities
And having nothing but two suitcases
Being transported to a new place
They would now have to call home

Treated as second-class citizens
Japanese-Americans still wanted to fight
For the very country that saw them as the enemy

The soldiers needed
Courage to fight
Perseverance to keep fighting
And humility to fight harder
To lead the country to victory

Discriminated against in their own community
And unwanted as soldiers in their own country

They still fought for the United States
As proud Japanese-Americans

Second Place: MALINA MIURA
Culver City High School; Culver City, CA
Grade 12 (2020-2021 academic year)

Malina Miura, a recent graduate from Culver City High School, is looking forward to spending the next four years at University of California, Irvine, currently going in with an undeclared major. She enjoys doing calligraphy and digital art, and hanging out with friends in her free time. She was inspired to enter the Go For Broke Poetry Contest because of her familial connection to Nisei soldier, Douglas Tanaka, who served in the 100th Battalion during World War II.

I decided to enter this contest after watching my Uncle Douglas Tanaka talk about his story in an interview and what life was like as a 100th Battalion soldier during World War II. It was really inspiring to hear how he overcame obstacles as a Japanese American and his achievements both during the war and afterwards. I hope to continue to share my Uncle Douglas’ legacy along with the other Nisei soldiers’ experiences to educate and inspire those of younger generations.

The Will To Fight

This not-so-ancient history
Serves as a reminder
To be courageous and speak up
To persevere when things become tough
And to have humility and work harder
Even when the world feels like it’s against you

So, I carry this story with me
As a proud Japanese-American
A Modest Man

I was confronted by death, but he feared me and ran. Barren grounds and pale-yellow grass perished below our feet. As I scouted up ahead of the platoon, I met a nest of 15 men with spitting cobras wrapped around their arms, so I waved “cover” to the rest, and braced the ground, crawling toward the silvery snakes. While bullets spat above my head, and from my own hands, pieces of metal jumped into the air with a snap and boom, until a white flag waved their surrender over bodies weeping crimson.

So today I hold no animosity, but I remain marked by my past. Two violet hearts heal nothing but pride—for a fool. An extra fold of skin stretches from my neck down my back, meant to sloppily cover an old gash where the ghost shrapnel still haunts me. And a sterling star remains hidden in a drawer beside a bed, or in a box in the mess of a garage, or anywhere that the light does not reach. I will teach my children how memories cost more than metal. But all I want to remember is that after all I’ve lost, at least I still bear my honor, and I wen’ go for broke.
Service, Identity, and Purpose: What the Nisei Veterans Taught Me

Identity has always been a struggle to me. As a third-generation Japanese-American, my family wasn’t in the U.S. long enough for me to feel like I actually belonged in America, yet I grew up with no connection to any relatives I had in Japan. I was often expected by both strangers and friends to speak a second language and know my cultural background well. While I was proud of my last name and enjoyed Japanese food, that was the extent of being Japanese I felt I had the right to be.

By the time I reached high school, I decided that I needed to accept the unique position held by many minority Americans—to accept that I would never be “Japanese” enough for most people, nor would I look “American” enough to be treated as such. Yet, summer before senior year, my sister took an interest in a group of soldiers that courageously fought in the toughest WWII battles—the 442nd regiment. To my astonishment, like me, they were all Japanese-American. While I was familiar with the internment relocation centers they were wrongly forced into, it surprised me that—despite facing harsh discrimination—the Nisei soldiers served their country, when it turned its back on them. It made me wonder, what is patriotism?

Patriotism isn’t just waving the flag on July 4th. It isn’t only seeing perfection in our country, while turning a blind eye to its faults. Patriotism is bringing change and improvement to our country through leading by example. The Nisei veterans showed me this by rising to protect and serve the US in light of the racism they faced. They stood for equality, by demonstrating that the American spirit lies not just in those who appear white, but in all who call this nation their home, regardless of their race. That is the ultimate sacrifice: service, with a purpose of improving one’s country.

I attended the Go For Broke Aloha Gala in 2019. It was a night of amazing people and food, but nothing compared to seeing the Nisei veterans on stage, who were a testament to patriotism, sacrifice, and courage through the toughest adversity. That night, I learned that all the veterans had an incredible sense of humility, despite achieving so much. Afterward, the legacy of the Nisei veterans stayed in my mind. I felt as if I finally had a sense of belonging to being both Japanese and an American, in embracing the Nisei veterans’ experience. They made me realize that being Japanese-American is something to be proud of—not confused about.

I’m currently a midshipman in NROTC, which will guide me to commissioning as an officer in the US Navy upon graduation. This is how I’d like to show appreciation and gratitude to Nisei veterans—by following their footsteps and serving my country as a proud Japanese American. I intend to carry their legacy and core values of courage, sacrifice, equality, humility, and patriotism in everything I do. I hope I make them proud.
Fight for the Right: The Power and Relevance of the Japanese American WWII Veteran Experience

National trauma fosters the best and worst in us. Amidst episodes of hardship and isolation, citizens are presented the options of pursuing the better angels of our nature or succumbing to sinister suspicion. Those who follow the wayward path often cannot differentiate patriotism from paranoia. Never have these pressing circumstances been more evident than during the Second World War and the COVID-19 pandemic. Although many Americans trekked a moral high ground during both global calamities, certain segments of society nonetheless fueled groundless allegations and racist attacks against loyal Asian Americans. In these modern times—fraught with tension and division—the relevance of the Japanese American WWII veteran experience is palpable in countless realms of society.

The exploits of those highly decorated warriors speak to the highest virtues of patriotism and national service. More evocatively, the heroism of those veterans underscores a principled tenant: one cannot measure a dutiful American solely by their appearance. One must always measure the goodness of individuals by their deeds and the content of their character. Whether pondering events of 1942 or 2020, this maxim must always serve as a needle in our moral compass.

As a graduate student studying World War II America, I constantly revisit the great struggle of nearly eighty years ago. I perpetually seek inspiration from the generation that defeated totalitarianism, preserved democracy, and demonstrated selflessness in the face of adversity—qualities which occasionally seem in short supply in our own troubled days. In my historically driven mind, no classification of American citizen was more noble and virtuous than the Nisei. Like their embattled African American comrades, Nisei donned the uniforms of a country that cast doubts over their sympathies and abilities. As many distinguished veterans demonstrated, gallantry and commitment could be pure methods of spurning inaccurate racial assumptions.

One such veteran I only recently learned of was Ben Kuroki, an all-American Nebraska farm boy hailing from a family of twelve. Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, Kuroki and a brother enlisted in the service. Somehow bypassing the segregation line, Kuroki entered the ranks of the 8th Air Force, where he served as a gunner on a B-24 and flew thirty missions. Following a rotation back to the States, Kuroki delivered speeches at various Japanese American internment camps to encourage military recruitment. While these acts prompted some internees to call him a puppet of an oppressive government, Kuroki remained undeterred in his resolve to serve—ultimately flying a full tour with the 20th Air Force in the Pacific. His actions demonstrate a universal power of perseverance to whom anyone can aspire.

In a postwar interview, Kuroki candidly admitted, “I had to fight like hell for the right to fight for my own country.” We like to think of history as a rising road, a progression of struggles that will eventually ensure equality for all. However, as Kuroki suggests, we must always be prepared to wage the good fight in the name of equity and humanity. The future demands as much.
The Nisei veterans’ story is one of collective perseverance, courage, and heroism. For many Japanese Americans today, the stories of these veterans are woven into the fabric of our family histories and shape our lives. They are our grandparents — Obaachan and Ojiichan — and our great-aunts and great-uncles. Japanese American generations today look to our recent ancestors, past and present, to pass on their stories and carry these legacies within us.

A set of DVDs contains my grandfather’s story, an interview with the Go For Broke National Education Center conducted six years ago, just four months before his passing. He regales his personal history, from his childhood on a farm growing daikon and gobo in southern California to retirement in Hawai‘i and everything in between. Within his details of enlisting in the army and experience in combat emerge themes present in all Nisei veterans’ stories: persistent humility, unwavering courage, and unimaginable sacrifice.

When the interviewer asks what my grandfather would want viewers to take away, he pauses for just a moment, his features gently pensive.

“Accept life for what it is. Make an effort to do the right thing, morally and physically.” He pauses once more, considering his next words.

“Release prejudices from our lives, no matter what direction they go in. I think that would make everyone happier. Although,” he purses his lips, “I don’t think that’s something everyone can do.”

Nisei veterans know this all too well. Even as the most decorated military unit in history, losing six times its original number by war’s end to earn the title “The Purple Heart Battalion,” the 442nd Regimental Combat Team was segregated, comprised of all Japanese American soldiers. The same prejudicial sentiments that prompted the forced removal and incarceration of over 120,000 Japanese Americans and disbanded Japanese American defense units in the Hawaiian islands, appeared in the military. But this outside prejudice and segregation brought a strong sense of camaraderie and community among soldiers who were determined to prove that ancestry does not define loyalty. In fighting the physical war, these soldiers also faced battles for equality within their own military’s ranks and at home.

In many ways, Japanese Americans, and Asian Americans in general, still fight these battles today. While prejudicial stereotypes and treatment of Asian Americans perpetual foreigners simmer just beneath the surface, a surge in violent attacks against Asian elders in this past year has brought these prejudices — and campaigns against them — bubbling to the surface. The wounds of incarceration camps and war still run deep through generations. Yet these painful experiences help open our eyes to similar injustices and continue the fight for civil rights.

This is the Japanese American veterans’ experience that remains relevant to us all today: the wisdom to identify injustice where we see it, the strength to challenge it, and the courage to change it.

Living a Legacy of Perseverance and Courage

Third Place: JULIET BOST
University of California, Davis
Third Year (2020-2021 academic year)

Juliet Bost (they/them/their) is a student at the University of California, Davis, majoring in Political Science with a minor in Religious Studies. They are interested in exploring the intersection of political attitudes and religious affiliation within the Asian American diaspora and hope to contribute their experience and scholarship to ongoing discussions of race, religion, and politics in America. In their spare time, Juliet is active in the young Asian American Buddhist community and a board member of their campus Taekwondo club.

Growing up a yonsei Japanese American, I was fortunate to learn of the Nisei veterans’ shared experience in World War II firsthand from my grandfather Lt. Colonel Yukio Yokoe, whose humility, courage, and spirit shone through his actions and quiet reflections. After he passed away, I watched his archived interview with the Go For Broke National Education Center and was inspired to highlight his personal experience within the collective Nisei veterans’ narrative. I entered this contest to honor his story and legacy today.