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NIKKEI KAZU IIJIMA HONORED BY CHINESE WORKERS  
50 Years of Political/Community activism Recalled

In conjunction with the celebration of Chinese New Years and the 11th Anniversary of Chinese Staff and Workers Association, Kazu Iijima - Japanese American activist extraordinary, was honored in Chinatown by the CSWA at a luncheon on Sunday, February 24. A framed calligraphied citation was presented to her by Dr. Mini Liu, also an activist leader, before a crowd of 300 guests. The citation read:

"Kazu Iijima's 70 years have been a noble life--a life-time helping countless progressive causes, including support of Asian American workers. Since 1980, Kazu has been an inspiration for CSWA. Since the Silver Palace Organization's drive, she has walked on nearly every one of the picket-lines. Kazu will always be remembered by CSWA."

Kazu Ikeda Iijima's political life began over 50 years ago in Berkeley, California, when she and her sisters, Mary, (who also resides in New York) and Nori who still lives in the Bay area--steadfastly pursued a path hardly trod in a placid Japanese community. The path was the search for meaningful activity, a political understanding of the contradictions in society - especially the prevailing conditions of that time. Kazu discovered the realities of poverty and racism. Through discussion with her sisters, Nori and Mary, Kazu began seeing that ideals and principles alone cannot bring about a just society; that one must understand the concepts of economic structures, question ownership and relations to production, and work in concert with the oppressed in society.

From YWCA work, she 'shifted gears' and joined the Young Communist League; became conscious of the labor movement and the inequities for the lower echelon workers. The three sisters became radicals, and in the general Japanese community, <sup>was</sup> ~~was~~ looked upon as oddities, moreso - that her father was a Japanese nationalist. Her mother was an early feminist, but died when Kazu was only 15.

Kazu left the Communist Party during the war for the backward position it took on the Japanese American evacuation, even to the point of ousting all of its <sup>Nisei</sup> Japanese American members. ~~She continued reinforcing her politics of social concerns by joining other organizations. In New York, she became a member of Japanese American Committee for Democracy.~~



In 1942, Kazu married Tak Iijima, a fellow-activist and talented musician, who was drafted in the army just before the war. The two experienced Mississippi's racism where Kazu worked in the Aloha USO in Hattiesburg while Tak trained <sup>with</sup> a 442 cadre in Camp Shelby. After the war, the Iijima's moved to New York. Here, they birthed two more activists - daughter, Lynne, a mother of two; and son, Chris, now a father and lawyer, who was a much-in-demand Asian American movement folk-singer of the 60's.

Kazu's long years of community experiences enabled her to utilize her capabilities in laying the foundation for the Asian American Movement. Among the many groups that sprouted, she was instrumental in the creation of two of the most consistently active: the Asian Americans for Action which she began with Minō Matsuda and her sister, Mary Ikeda: in the late 60's; and the Organization of Asian Women which she nurtured in the 80's with Becky Hom <sup>other</sup> and young Asian women activists.

Although she works with many Asian and multi-national organizations, and inter-acts with African Americans, Puerto Ricans and now Arab American groups, her most meaningful work, she says has been with Pan Asian formations-- the participation of Asians from all the Asian backgrounds - such as the newest group that was recently launched--Asian/Pacific Islanders Against the War.

This grass-roots organizer can be seen trudging along in demonstrations in freezing winter, roasting summer, always cheerful and in fact, radiant; has been an ever energizing presence; a quiet inspiration; a behind-the-scene worker; always sharing munchies and goodies on marches; encouraging the younger generation, working in concert with all nationalities; and spurring Asian Americans to hold their banner high.

She is the quintessence of the Asian American struggle.

Yuri Kochiyama