

Survivor's simple plea: Love, not holocaust

By Jacqueline Cutler
Staff Writer

Shigeko Sasamori's message is simple: Love one another. The simplicity of the message from a survivor of the first atomic bombing underlies the complexities of why she traverses the country, talking to anyone who will listen, and imploring them to think and act about peace.

For peace is something sacred to Sasamori, ever since war shattered her life at the age of 13. At 8:15 a.m. on Aug. 6, 1945, Sasamori and other junior high school students were clearing debris from the streets of war-torn Hiroshima to make room for emergency equipment. She said she never heard the bomb that lighted the sky and turned the buildings to rubble. The first of the two atomic bombs dropped on Japan left more than 100,000 of her compatriots dead.

Despite the haunting peace that followed the bombing and her 29 years in the United States, Sasamori has never forgotten that the nuclear fission bomb ravaged life as she knew it, and left its hideous imprint on her delicate face.

Yesterday, during the first lecture in her three-day stay in Greenwich, the 51-year-old woman spoke to students at Greenwich High School. The teen-agers jammed into a small conference room to watch a film,

"Race to Oblivion," and listen to Sasamori. Although gum was cracked and sneakers were shuffled during the documentary, the impact of Sasamori's words forced the teen-agers to draw in their breath and just listen.

She gestured with her hands as she told of how she spent four days lying under a petrified tree. As she lay there, her face so badly scorched that no one could tell the back of her head from the front, she whimpered to passersby to notify her parents that she had survived.

Sasamori takes nothing for granted, and she celebrates life daily. Instead of a perfunctory greeting to the students, her opening is: "It is so nice to see you people, young, happy and good looking. Once I was just like you."

But she doesn't use the greeting to introduce an appeal for pity. Instead, Sasamori tells how lucky she is because her family also survived. The joy she expresses for life is nowhere more shining than when she talks about her son, the college student.

The mention of his existence gives her reason to flip through a dog-eared address book to display a snapshot of a handsome young man. Beaming, Sasamori said 21-year-old Norman Cousins Sasamori — named for the peace activist she considers her spir-

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STAFF PHOTO BY MARILYN A. HOGARTY
Shigeko Sasamori, a victim of the 1945 blast in Hiroshima, celebrates each day her chance to live. Her work as a nurse's aide with infants gives her courage, she says, because they represent hope.

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itual father — has no health problems because of his mother's exposure to the blast.

Now divorced, she says she devotes her time to explaining why another war must not take place.

As Sasamori describes her life, she punctuates her speech — which she apologizes for, despite her fluency in English — with graceful gestures of the hands.

Her hands tell the story of the effects of a bomb so powerful that it burned cement red. The hands are gnarled and badly

burnt; the fingers seem to be at war with each other. Yet they are never idle. Besides using them to illustrate how the bomb dropped — hands together held high, brought down quickly, then thrown apart — she uses them to nurture.

Sasamori is a certified nurse's aide. She works with infants in her hometown of Manhattan Beach, Calif. She said she draws courage from the babies because they represent hope.

"I never forget the horrible things," she said. "It could happen again. Any day. Who knows? If it happens, it makes me angry. I have anger for people because

they could be stupid and never learn if it happens again."

The documentary, starring Burt Lancaster and Sasamori, will be shown at Convent of the Sacred Heart and local churches and synagogues during the weekend. The Greenwich Forum on Nuclear Arms sponsored her trip here.

When she leaves Greenwich, Sasamori will spread her message in Pittsburgh, then in Philadelphia and Minneapolis. After that, she says, she'll go wherever she is asked to explain: "You must love each other and live for people."