

Oral History Interview

With

Tetsu Sueye

On 2/12/1988

In her home

Interviewer: Edna Gerstel

Gerstel: February 12th, 1988. This is Edna Gerstel interviewing Tetsu Sueye at her home, Alhambra, California.

Gerstel: Tetsu, why don't you begin by talking briefly about your educational background? And then your beginning work history.

Sueye: I was born in central California, and the family came south in 1917 and settled in the Lincoln Heights area. I went to grade school and high school within that area. I went to UCLA as a math major. No, I graduated in 1936, and got my general secondary teaching credential in 1937. During the period from 1937 to the time of the War, I was not able to get employment in LA school system, because of my minority background, I worked in a small grocery store owned by my parents.

At the time of Pearl Harbor, when discussions were rampant about what was to happen with those of Japanese background, a neighbor was being visited by her mother who

came from Little Rock Arkansas. She extended the invitation that if the time did come when everyone was to be evacuated, I was always welcome at her house. The time came and I left Los Angeles a week before everyone of Japanese background was frozen here.

The government was announcing the building of two more evacuation centers or concentration camps in southern Arkansas, I read in the paper that teachers were needed, and I looked into that possibility. Both Relocation authorities had set up offices in Little Rock. I went in to be interviewed by persons who had never seen a person of Japanese background. They were not able to answer my question of whether or not I would be admitted as an internee to one of the camps or would I be accepted as a resident of Arkansas. They did not have the answer and hence an inquiry was made of officials of Washington D.C. The answer was not definite. But I was told in all probability I would be only accepted as internee.

Since I did not intend to be, what shall I use, incarcerated I guess, I then began to inquire of friends who had connections in other parts of the country. Through a fellow UCLA graduate, who happened to be with the American Friends Service Community, I heard of an opening in Chicago and was offered a part time job with Robin Board at one of the Presbrian Neighborhood Houses. Arrangements were made for me to get further part-time employment.

During the next couple of years, I worked at the settlement house as an activities worker in the area of physical sports, crafts and sewing. I had the opportunity of taking some of our settlement house youngsters to a Presbyterian summer camp outside of Holland, Michigan. It was at this time that I met a social work graduate of the University of Pittsburg and learned that there was more to working with people besides concentrating on their acquiring skills in activities of different kinds.

I made an application to the University of Pittsburg; and at that point they were on a system where they were unable to accept my application. I then made application to Boston Reserve and was accepted, not for the Fall, but for a Spring semester. So I decided to continue my employment at the Settlement House until the following year. In the mean time, the University of Pittsburg was among those universities which were opening their doors to students of Japanese background. The decision was made there, that it would be through this School of Social Work that it would be easiest to achieve that policy.

After I had already made up my mind that I would stay at the Settlement House until Spring and enter Boston Reserve, I got a notice from the University of Pittsburg that they were looking for an guinea pig for their School of Social Work one of Japanese background. It was not until further request from the school and through my talking with persons who knew a little bit more about social work, that I accepted the invitation and left Chicago on a weekend and the following Monday, started at the

School of Social Work. In 1946, I received a Master of Science Social Work Administration degree and worked in the Settlement House in Pittsburg.

In the mean time, the War had ended and my parents and family had returned to the Los Angeles area. And as my parents were getting older, rather than to place the full responsibility on a sister, I decided I should return to Los Angeles. I accepted the job offered by the Church Welfare Bureau. I was there as a worker, supervisor and then director of the Group Work Division until 1961.

During this time, Japanese were coming in from Japan and having difficulties also the third generation of Japanese were now becoming teenagers, and different kinds of problems were arising. Within the framework of the Group Work Division, we offered services to these groups and I got involved with teenage girls groups primarily. In 1954, one of the local newspapers carried a large headline that "Teenage Girls Brawl". This was quite upsetting, not only to the community and the parents of the particular girls, but also the local junior high school that the girls were attending. We were called in, to see what we could do. I was involved personally with this group of girls and stayed with them for that period, from 1954 to June 1955.

There was much discussion about what had to be done, not only among the girls themselves and with their parents, but also with the community agencies, the YWCA, and the Probation Department plus two of Japanese background Protestant churches.

In the end, these girls with graduation went their separate ways, and that particular group was dissolved. Later in 1958, the Japanese community has its first occasion where a teenage boy killed another teenager as a result of group competition. At this time there were a number of us social workers of Japanese background who were concerned and we met together to decide what our particular role ought to be. Also how we could help, one agency, the Children's Home everybody looked upon it as a home for orphan Japanese youngsters, which was far from the truth. Actually it was an agency which took care of youngsters while families were settling themselves, whether it was through divorce, separation, death. But the youngsters did have some family connections. It was the executive of that agency who then began to develop additional programs under their auspices.

At this point, I was then involved as a consultant. But felt that my first responsibility was to the Church Welfare Bureau and therefore did not want to get any more involved in the community with direct services. In 1970, I was asked to be a member of a group of organizations, which included the Japanese American Citizens League, the Protestant Ministers Organization, The Buddhist Priest Organization, and the Gardener's Federation, they were the four strong organizations in the Japanese community, which were now exploring the possibilities of developing a senior citizen's residences.

There were many, many decisions, problems and so on. But the building was finally

erected. And the residence itself were dedicated and opened in November 1975. I stayed on that board till 1980. And then resigned, feeling that 10 years on the board was long enough, also I felt that the residence ought to hiring a full-time social worker. I did not want to get involved with the personnel, the residents and the solving the problems. Beginning to service on a volunteer basis, I felt it was much too complicated.

Gerstel: What kind of problems?

Sueye: Problems had to do with residents really not wanting to be there, but be almost being pressured to coming in by their families. Also to those who were coming in, it was almost like terminating their connections with their youngsters, which I thought was not good. Also there was wide-spread rumor about this being for underprivileged or low income people, like being on welfare. So that it was not popular initially to become a resident, of this housing project, Senior Citizen Housing. It was not until a couple of years later that we had people clamoring to come in, because the attitude had changed. The facility had been relocated in the midst of little Tokyo and made it a very convenient and also a safe residence for older people. In the mean time, problems were arising especially on the west side, with more Negro's moving into what was initially an all, practically an Oriental neighborhood. So there were people who wanted to get out of there. In addition, children of these senior citizens, having increasing problems with their respective families and continuing to exist on a three generational pattern

was not easy, especially as the youngsters became teenagers. So there were all these kinds of problems which showed themselves in a variety of ways, not only within the building, but also in the community at large.

In 1961, the UCLA School of Social Welfare faculty received a NIMH funds to conduct a study on Japanese and delinquency. Because it was after the actual shooting and the follow-up that everybody became much more aware of what was going on in the Japanese community. So I left the Church Welfare Bureau to become a part of this study. I was with them, what, almost two years, when an opportunity arose for me to accept an offer from the Campfire girls. They received funds to provide services to 7 year old girls who were already identified as not doing well in school, with the idea in mind that if we provided professionally trained good workers to meet with these youngsters, and their parents, as well as communities to not only effect the girls in their school achievement, but also work them into the regular Campfire Organization. I was with this program for two years. I left that program to take a summer assignment with the Probation Department, and specifically at the a School for girls, where a fellow social worker had provided the inter-room services for previous summers but could not continue this particular summer. Her assignment was to substitute for regular senior probation officers who were taking their vacations. So I took on this assignment for the summer before I qualified to work with youth for a special project conducted by the LA county Bureau Public Assistance. After that project was terminated, I was assigned to a district office as a staff development person, and stayed there until a staff

development person was assigned specifically to McCarran Hall. As is the practice with Public agencies, usually decisions are made as to where you can best make your contribution. When I was about to be returned to a district assignment, I decided that perhaps this might be the best time for me to retire.

In 1978, I retired from the, what then became the Department of Public Social Services. I retired in the Spring, in the Fall I was approached by (-----) Unit, sponsored by San Diego State, whose specific role was to help local school systems to follow through on what had become known as the loud decision. This was to result of a case brought to Federal attention in San Francisco. A foreign born Chinese student who was not proficient English should be taught or helped in their native language first and then moved into the general stream. This was a federal mandate; this Unit in San Diego was providing services in the area in which I happened to be living, the Alhambra school system, a particular school which was located in Monterey Park. I was involved with that group in meeting with parents and helping them to not only communicates with one another, because we had several different racial groups involved. The Chinese, who divided primarily into those of Cantonese background, and those of Mandarin background, as well as persons who arrived with wealth, money and those who came in after having spent time in what was considered a point of entry - Old Chinatown so that the two groups were very distinctive. We also had people with Japanese background who had settled in what was known at large as a well-established, upper-middle income community. Then there were those with Latin background.

They developed a way in which the students could be helped on individual basis and in selective groups. There was a general complaint that some of the teachers that were being employed did not speak English in the way in which, educated persons felt English should be spoken. In order to meet requirements that persons be bilingual, some teachers were hired whose educational experience was primarily in China. This is what was causing the problem.

I was with that program for one school year, and then was approached by a person within the LA Unified School District. I received the call from the person whose responsibility it was, to find another person to join a project being conducted within the Board of Education. This was an Employee Assistance Program which was to be developed as a result of concern about school personnel having problems especially with alcohol. It started with this kind of a problem first, and then following the pilot project it was determined that personnel had problems not only with alcohol but with other kinds of problems and hence the emphasis then on the Employee Assistance Program. I was with that program for almost three years when funding ended.

My other social work activities had been strictly on a volunteer basis. From 1983 to this past year, 1987, I volunteered at the Senior Citizen's Residence in Little Tokyo, in the office, feeling that I did not want to get involved with the problems of the residents, but I was there to be supportive to the manager and his wife who was the assistant

manager. I provided support as well as company to two persons who lived on the premises seven days a week, work together seven days a week. I provided a kind of a respite support for them. I enjoyed that experience. At this point, see I left this volunteer position because the manager and his wife moved. So I guess I am exploring other volunteer possibilities.