Lived Experiences Informing a More Lived Curriculum:
Bearing Witness to the Japanese American Experience of Exclusion

By Jonathan Garfunkel, Project Director

Almost a century ago, John Dewey talked about schools being made an authentic form of active community life, rather than "a place set apart in which to learn lessons." This idea about K-12 education is as important today as it was close to a century ago. Educating young people in the 21st century involves helping them bear witness to realities past and present, and fostering responsible citizenship in a world of unprecedented interdependence, challenge, and possibility.

How can a lived experience of bearing witness for educators inform and enhance a more lived curriculum for their students? This past school year, a pilot project was launched to test this question by pairing up a team of local elementary teachers with elders from the Japanese American community to retrace their journey to Manzanar concentration camp where they spent the first portion of their internment.

The project is called: **Only What We Can Carry: Lessons from the Japanese-American Internment Experience** (OWWCC). In 2009, this experimental initiative in educational and community development set out to explore how offering educators, responsible for teaching about the Japanese American internment, the opportunity to study and bear witness with former detainees who live in their community, would enhance and enrich their ability to more authentically and accurately bring this topic to life for their students.

Our 2009 *Only What We Can Carry* Project Delegation, April 2009
Global Source Education, Photo: J. Garfunkel

The OWWCC project was centered on Bainbridge Island, because of the particular resonance the internment of Japanese Americans has to this Puget Sound community. To our knowledge, this kind of professional learning experience had not been organized for educators, especially to those teaching in communities with histories so closely tied to the internment. The project was conceived, organized and facilitated by Global Source Education, a learning organization based on Bainbridge Island.

This pilot project was made possible through a grant from the Washington Civil Liberties Public Education Program, along with the generous contributions of a number of local individual

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The team for this pilot project included Wilkes Elementary fourth grade teachers, Bill Covert and Warren Read, along with multiage elementary teacher Gail Davis and librarian Mary Fox from Breidablik Elementary, in the North Kitsap School District. These educators have dedicated curriculum related to study of the Japanese-American Internment experience.

Accompanying and advising us from the Japanese American community were Frank Kitamoto and Lilly Kodama, who were 3 & 7 year old siblings at the start of the internment, and Kazuko Kay Nakao, who was 22 years old when her family was forced to leave Bainbridge. This was the first time Frank Kitamoto and Lilly Kodama had returned to Manzanar since they had been interned. At age 89, it was Kay Nakao's second visit since internment. Mary Woodard, daughter of former Bainbridge Review editors, Walt and Millie Woodward, was also part of the team, and her recent book, "In Defense of Their Neighbors", served as a valuable local source for our teachers.

Our team met for a series of planning sessions in preparation for this project. In early May 2009, we made a four-day journey from Bainbridge to Manzanar by plane and car. We spent 2 ½ days at the Manzanar Historic Site, which is overseen by the National Park Service.

The Elders of our Delegation National Park Service Staff
Manzanar Historic Site, Photo: J. Garfunkel

Our visit was deeply enhanced by the warm welcome and deluxe hospitality our team received from National Park Service staff, who went out of their way for our Japanese American elders. Led by the Chief of Interpretation, Alisa Lynch, we were guided through the entire camp, including a special visit to the block where Kay, Lilly, Frank and their families lived, along with the rest of the Bainbridge Island residents. While the barracks were no longer standing, we were able to locate their exact position and found remnants and artifacts of the life they once lived in this high desert. We experienced the harsh sand storms, dry heat, and arid climate that Kay recalled many times when describing her memories of Manzanar. One cannot ignore what

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Bainbridge residents had to give up in order to be relocated to an unknown, undeveloped concentration camp in the foothills of the high sierra.

In the well-designed interpretative center at the Manzanar Historic Site, we read the words of Kay, saw images Frank and Lilly, and found the names and references of all of the Bainbridge community who were interned at Manzanar. We were introduced to the wealth of educational resources that have been collected and developed by the Manzanar Historic Site, and were also able to visit other local museums and sites related to the internment period.

To follow in the footsteps of our Japanese American elders who were reliving their experiences as they walked the grounds of Manzanar, some for the first time in more than 60 years, was a powerful experience of bearing witness. The teachable moments were many. Some of the deepest moments came in listening to the expressions of compassion, humility, sadness and laughter from Kay, Lilly and Frank, as they described their experiences they and their families endured.

Recently Built Replica of a Mess Hall
Manzanar Historic Site, Photo: J. Garfunkel

Here are the voices of those who participated reflecting on their experiences:

"What an educational and memorable journey it was... After the forced uprooting and incarceration of April 1, 1942 to Manzanar, I never dreamed I'd have a positive and good feeling about the place. This trip truly changed all that, realizing strongly the importance of this Interpretative Center as an educational center… These conscientious educators with deep understanding teaching the 'Internment Experience' makes the community and world a better place." – Kazuko Kay Nakao

"To see and visit Manzanar after all these years was quite empowering for me. I was a seven year-old child in 1942 and my memories of the place were a mixture of fun and games; unappetizing food; dust storms; scorpions; rattlesnakes; and a guard with a rifle atop the guard tower. After experiencing a strong windy dust storm as an adult, I better understand the burden my mother and other adults carried to keep the children content and most of all to leave us with no bitterness." – Lilly Kodama

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"Our four day trip to Manzanar was one of the most significant journeys I've had in my 70 years. To return for the first time in 64 years to where I spent my early childhood from age 3 to 6 was an experience I cherish. Standing at the exact spot where our family lived in Block 3 and to see the surrounding archaeological remnants of our one mile square concentration camp helped me to fill in the missing pieces. The bonding of our group of 10 in 4 short days was what made the trip especially special. To see and feel the empathy and dedication of the non former incarcerees, (Global Source and the Teachers) who were with us, gives me hope for the future when we as primary sources are no longer physically here that our stories will live on." – Frank Kitamoto

Elders reflecting on their time at Manzanar by a former garden and pond,
with Alisa Lynch of the National Park Service
Manzanar Historic Site, Photo: J. Garfunkel

"As I look back, the journey has allowed me to develop friendships among the community in which I live and come to a better understanding of events in the life of this community. Through this understanding and related stories I have been able to enrich my classroom practices… It is important to remember that this is the story of our community. This is the perfect opportunity to illuminate the diversity of our community. …This unique opportunity to retrace and relive the Internment journey with survivors goes right to the heart of developing a social studies curriculum with depth. It is with a background of having relived the history with those who have lived it that we can authentically bring it to life for our students." – Bill Covert, Wilkes Elementary

"My trip to Manzanar with Global Source was a once in a lifetime experience both personally and professionally… As a teacher, I want my students to see the world clearly and truthfully and to understand that every person who watched the Japanese Americans incarcerated allowed a part of themselves to be incarcerated." – Gail Davis, Breidablik Elementary

"The dust, the beauty, the weight of memory in the company of survivors, witnesses, and storytellers. The journey to Manzanar is one of the highlights of my professional career and has infused the work I want to share with students. Each member of the group revealed and

burnished a different facet of a complex experience; laughter, sadness, loss, grief, compassion, camaraderie." – Mary Fox, Breidablik Elementary

"Without a doubt, though, my May trip to Manzanar, to walk among the memories with those who lived it, is one of the most meaningful and stirring experience in which I have ever had the opportunity to take part… I am a firm believer in authentic learning, both as a teacher and as a writer. I believe that the two go hand in hand. We always hear, 'write what you know' in relationship to writing, but the same should and must be true for teaching. 'Teach what you know.' And the more you know—really know, the better you can teach. My experience on this Manzanar pilgrimage showed me that, as much as I thought I knew, I didn't know the half of it. I am richer because of it, and my students are as well." – Warren Read, Wilkes Elementary

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Something special happened during this project that each member of this team will carry back into our work and lives. Both hearts and minds were deeply touched by this learning experience. We were so grateful to our elders for the openness and honesty with which they shared their memories and stories, so many of which were brought to life by being back at Manzanar, in ways they would not have been otherwise. You cannot bear witness to the internment walking side by side with those who were most directly impacted and not leave more deeply concerned with fairness, justice, diversity, responsibility and rights. The lessons learned about compassion, forgiveness, and the value of community were present in the way Kay, Lilly and Frank approached the injustice and suffering experienced by Japanese-Americans. It is by remembering that we carry forward the values that define our humanity.

For educators in this region, Bainbridge Island offers us a unique landscape of learning and living history for bringing the internment experience to life for this generation of students. But the gap of learning and understanding has been in what actually happened to our island neighbors during the years they spent away from home. The OWWCC project aimed to contribute in filling in that experience for educators and students. Going as members of the same community, made the experience even more meaningful, as we were able to put so much of the experience into context of our home and school life. The journey to Manzanar completed the circle of awareness, knowledge and engagement in teaching and learning about the Japanese-American internment experience.

Global Source supported the team of teachers in the process of developing a curriculum shaped by their learning experiences during this project. It is directed at late elementary students, and integrated with the Washington State Social Studies Classroom Based Assessments. A series of essential questions frame the lessons and activities:

- Why did the U.S. government decide to intern the Japanese Americans during WWII?
- What was the overall response of the U.S. citizenry to internment?
- What are the rights and responsibilities of U.S. citizens?
- Do individual rights trump the government's rights to make decisions for the "common good?"
- Are there universal human rights that every human should have?

We will see the significance of such an experience continue to manifest in classrooms and in our community. There are plans for a community presentation and teacher workshop to share our experiences at Manzanar with the wider community. The curriculum developed will be made

available through OSPI and Global Source. The success of the pilot project has inspired interest in carrying forward the OWWCC Project into a second year, and inviting new team of local educators and former detainees to join us for a journey to Manzanar in 2010. We are also excited about the possibilities of working further with the National Park Service and of connecting our work to the Internment Memorial Site being developed on Bainbridge Island.

OWWCC 2009 Delegation at the entrance to Manzanar, Our Final Day
Manzanar Historic Site, Photo: Heidi Urish

The educator Maxine Greene wrote, “We who are in education cannot know, cannot truly know how it was, how it is. But we can attend to the some of the voices, some of the stories. And as we do so, our perspectives on the meanings of freedom and the possibility of freedom in this country may particularize and expand” (from The Dialectic of Freedom). By tending to the important stories of the past, we are better able to prepare young people for the future. Making learning a lived experience offers students the opportunity to practice scholarship and citizenship in ways that will serve them, their schools and the larger community.

For more information about the OWWCC Project, visit our website:
www.GlobalSourceNetwork.org