Suyematsu Farm Legacy Alliance

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Bainbridge Island's longest-working farm district, on Day Road East, will celebrate its 100th year in 2028.

The Suyematsu Farm Legacy Alliance wants to ensure the farm's historic barns, cabins and sheds are still standing proud then, and for another century beyond.

"This is the only public place on the island where you can bear witness to a century of history, and a landscape that has not changed over the course of those 100 years," says Jonathan Garfunkel, SFLA board member and farm historian and archivist. "It's a very unique asset in that regard."

Some of the historic structures date to 1928, when Yasuji and Mitsuo Suyematsu, immigrants from Japan, purchased the 40 acres and built up a robust family farm.

Active farming there waned during the wartime incarceration of the island's Japanese American community, but resumed when the Suyematsus' son Akio returned from the incarceration camps and military service.

An iconic island figure and proponent of "clean living," Akio was the first farmer on Bainbridge to go all organic in the 1980s, and created the island's largest compost operation at that time.

He worked the farm for the next six decades until his passing in 2012 at age 91. The City of Bainbridge

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SYLVESTER

Sylvester was brought into Kitsap Humane Society when his person passed away. Even among the longtime animal care professionals at KHS, the matting was as bad as they'd ever seen. And the smell. Oh, the smell.

Poor little Sylvester couldn't be living this way. He could barely move about, couldn't extend one hind leg, and his tail was literally glued to his hind end. He was a mess – and even though closing time was just minutes away, the veterinary staff was not going to let him spend one more night in this kind of discomfort.

Slowly and carefully, Dr. Buchannan began shaving the pup, starting with his head and working her way back. Sylvester initially resisted a bit, but soon figured out that good people were there to help. More than an hour later, Sylvester was freshly shaven and team members could sense his relief and joy, nearly three pounds lighter (and smelling a whole lot better).

Thank you for giving Sylvester a second chance! Please donate through One Call For All.

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Island had by that time purchased Suyematsu's land to preserve as public farmland and open space.

The 5 acres in the northeast corner were added to the local Historic Register in 2016. It's this corner, site of the farm's oldest structures, that is the particular concern of the newly formed SFLA.

The group is "dedicated to preserving and enhancing the living legacy and heritage of Akio Suyematsu and his family's original farm as a community asset involving a center of active farming, interpretation, and education."

Garfunkel said that over the last decade, the buildings – including a barn, sheds and Pickers Cabins – have fallen into disrepair to the point they're endangered.

"When you drive by the barn on Day Road, you see all those supports? That's to keep the barn from falling down," he said. "We need to properly rehabilitate, stabilize and restore them."

Today, many islanders may think of the farmland only for its seasonal farmstand and popular autumn pumpkin patch. But active farming there produces wine grapes and various crops, yielding some 80-100 tons of produce each year.

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Cutline | Photo credit

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The land itself has many stories to tell, and the farm buildings are tangible testaments to our multicultural heritage.

The Pickers Cabins, for instance, housed First Nations and other migrant workers who came down from Canada for the island's harvest season. The First Nations workers intermarriage with local Filipino immigrants created the Indipino community, with its own storied chapter in island history.

SFLA represents six local stakeholder groups, all with such historic ties to the land or interests in local preservation: Suyematsu & Bentryn Family Farmers Guild; the Suyematsu Family; Bainbridge Island Japanese American Community; Indipino Community of Bainbridge Island and Vicinity; EduCulture & The Only What We Can Carry Project; and the Bainbridge Island preservation community.

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Gifts through One Call for All will directly support repair and stabilization of the Suyematsu farm structures for educational visits and interpretation.

"This farm is not only worth preserving, but has a history and heritage that tells some of the most important stories of our island community," Garfunkel says, "from pioneering immigrant days, people coming to this island with nothing and following the American Dream to build something. The Japanese American experience, and all the tragedy and struggle and hope that came along with that. The Indipino community's experience, the agricultural experience.

"We need to remember that back in World War II, our island's community was driven by the strawberry industry that the Japanese Americans helped create." ■

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