

BYU History Student Studies Japanese-American Memorial

Lindsay Larson has been studying the history behind the newly erected Japanese-American National Monument as part of her ORCA sponsored undergraduate research project at Brigham Young University.

The memorial she visited last summer while in Washington, DC marks a dubious event in American history: the internment of thousands of American citizens of Japanese descent by the US government during World War II.

From 1941-1945 many Japanese-Americans were forced to relocate to barracks-type camps, taking only what they could carry after the sudden evictions from their homes. The monetary compensation they were given did not come close to equaling what they had left behind.

Larson says the government's official response about the event is that the internment was not instituted for national security purposes, but from "hysteria, prejudice and failure in leadership."



The memorial to Japanese-Americans interned during World War II, is found in Washington, D.C.

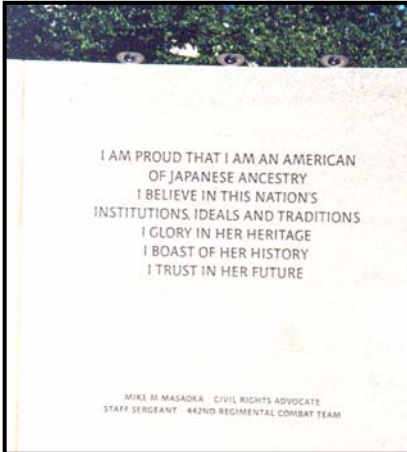
Inscribed on the monument is a quote from Mike Masaoka, an advocate of Japanese-American rights. Larson is studying how other Japanese-Americans have received his message. According to Larson, many believe he was overly compliant to US government demands instead of acting more defiantly against perceived civil rights abuses. During the war Masaoka served in the Army's 442nd regiment and was never imprisoned in the camps.

Larson looks for comparisons between Masaoka and other advocates for minority rights. She says her studies don't show him to be a civil rights activist as much as a popular voice for the Japanese-American people.

The History major compares Masaoka with Booker T. Washington, who believed that African Americans needed to demonstrate their economic worth in the post-Civil War society. His contemporary, WEB Dubois, disagreed with him, stating that all African-

Americans were naturally entitled to the same unalienable rights other American citizens enjoyed.

Fortunately for Larson, Masaoka's personal records are kept in Salt Lake City, just a short drive from campus. She began looking over his works last fall while writing a capstone paper. She also contacted all of the major Japanese-American organizations to get more information. "I got to talk to some interesting people," she says of her experience.



Masaoka's quote inscribed on the shrine.

Larson's findings show that most Japanese-Americans support the things Masaoka did and said on behalf of his peers, even if it seemed that he sided at times with government officials. She points out that Masaoka acted more as a pacifist than an activist, moderately appealing the government to ensure rights for his fellow citizens.

"His life was in some ways what a civil rights activist would have done," she says. "But at the same time that strand of accommodation was visible in most of his major accomplishments with the community."

Larson notes that perhaps those Japanese-Americans who seem to disagree with Masaoka's political stance include those who were denied many rights during those years of internment and suspicion. Still, others believe that if they, along with Masaoka, had not acted in such a way, they would not have moved so quickly to secure their civil rights.

Larson's study of the past resonates in the present, where many Americans are uneasy about what could happen to other patriotic Americans, such as Arabs and Muslims, if civil rights aren't assured. As a professional, she wants to work to prevent such misuses of power.