

JUDY KAWAGUCHI KUSAKABE '60

Nominated by David Moffett '60, Joan Kimura Mason '60, and Michael MacLeod '60



Judy Kawaguchi Kusakabe '60 had a productive and successful career as a dietitian, but it has been her volunteerism that has been her preeminent accomplishment and indeed her calling. Judy is a lifelong volunteer who has served the Mercer Island School District and volunteered with youth sports and numerous philanthropic organizations. Where she has left her greatest mark, however, has been through educating thousands of elementary, middle, and high school students, as well as community groups, about the Japanese American experience during World War II.

For more than 20 years, Judy has served as a presenter throughout our region, sharing her incarceration story with hundreds of groups. In 2023 alone, more than 1,500 children heard Judy's story. Her goals have been to make audiences more aware of a part of American history not well enough known, and to share how a community was unfairly targeted, simply because they "looked like the enemy." Judy's audiences are then able to share their knowledge of the incarceration story, as well as their greater understanding of the cultural and societal aspects related to the experience with others, thereby raising everyone's awareness.

Through her impactful volunteer efforts, Judy has engaged with various communities, schools, and organizations, offering firsthand accounts and insightful presentations about the Japanese American experience during the war. Her willingness to share deeply personal stories, coupled with historical context, fosters empathy, understanding, and an appreciation for cultural diversity among her audiences. Her ability to connect with students of all ages and backgrounds has had a lasting impact on everyone who hears her.

When Judy speaks about the personally painful cruelty perpetrated upon her people, she also references cruelty toward other groups and asks her audiences, especially young people, to keep her story in mind and to be vigilant toward unfair, bigoted, prejudicial actions toward any group that finds itself in peril. While many books have been written about the Japanese American experience during World War II, the effect of hearing someone with Judy's warmth and empathy telling their story in person is unforgettable.

Judy's commitment to her community, along with her commitment to using her story to break down walls and build bridges, make her the perfect example of the type of citizen Garfield High School should hope to create. Honoring her volunteerism is, in effect, honoring and highlighting the story of the treatment of the Japanese American community. As Judy states, "My effort is to be the voice for those who cannot talk about the time spent in the prison camps of WWII America." At the end of each presentation, Judy hands out two handmade origami cranes to each audience member – one to keep, to help them remember her story, and one to pass on to someone else. Many remember Judy's story and kindness years later and still have the paper crane she gave them.