

THREE GENERATIONS OF THE KUROMIYA FAMILY OF MONROVIA

Three generations of the Kuromiya family have called Monrovia home. Hisamitsu was an *Issei* or first generation American. Hisamitsu's son, Yosh, graduated from Monrovia-Arcadia-Duarte High in 1941 and was attending Pasadena Junior College when World War 2 began. Like other Japanese Americans, Hisamitsu's family was unjustly interned during World War II. At Heart Mountain camp, Yosh became a member of the Fair Play Committee and resisted the draft to demand his civil rights. Hisamitsu's grandson, Steven Kiyoshi Kuromiya, was conceived in Monrovia and born at Heart Mountain camp. Kiyoshi graduated from Monrovia High in 1961. Kiyoshi became a nationally recognized civil and gay rights activist.

HISAMITSU KUROMIYA (1887-1969)

Hisamitsu or "James" came to the United States in his late teens to find economic opportunity at a time when California used ethnic cheap labor. Yosh speculates, "My father probably decided to migrate to the United States to avoid the militarism in Meiji Japan." James started doing housework, gardening, and cooking for a family in Sierra Madre. When he married, his employers fixed up the chicken coop to house the newlyweds. James and his picture bride, Hana (1901-1988), had six children. The eldest son – a *Nisei*, or second generation American - died at childbirth and is buried at Sierra Madre Pioneer Cemetery. The second child, Hiroshi (1917-1982), would be Kiyoshi's father. The third baby died in the 1920 flu outbreak and is buried in Los Angeles' Evergreen Cemetery. Kazumi, Yosh, and Kimiye followed.

Hisamitsu and his family moved to 609 S. California Street in Monrovia. Hisamitsu peddled fresh vegetables to families living in Monrovia and Arcadia. Yosh remembers, "We were evicted from our California Street home because we were not supposed to be in the White area. We were two blocks north of Olive – the race line. I always wondered why we didn't go to Wild Rose Elementary which was only a few blocks away. Instead, we went to Santa Fe Elementary." For many years, Monrovia's children of color were sent to Huntington Elementary and some to Santa Fe Elementary. "After that, we lived at 201 W. Huntington Drive, near Primrose. After the war, it became a Chevrolet dealership." The Kuromiyas managed a little fruit stand on Huntington Blvd, the busy Route 66.

YOSHITO KUROMIYA (1923-2018)



Author's note: For years, I invited Yosh to revisit Monrovia. He was adamantly against it. But on a beautiful December day in 2017, Yosh came with his wife, Irene. We went to visit Recreation Park, where he used to look for coins under the bleachers after a baseball game. We drove north of Foothill where he and his friends had rolled down garbage cans. At lunch, Yosh said, "I didn't know Monrovia would have Japanese restaurants now." We also visited Kiyoshi's resting niche at the Live Oak Cemetery columbarium.

Yosh said, "I was shy and I felt quite alienated from my classmates. My Monrovia was a totally different world than that of my classmates. During my senior year, an English teacher whom I really respected, encouraged me to enter a speech contest sponsored by the Daughters of the American Revolution. For me, patriotism was loyalty to the principles of the Constitution, and not the flag or other symbols... My essay tied for first place with a White girl, Merle, that I knew from first grade at Santa Fe Elementary. But on the day of the speech contest, I ditched school – the only day I ever ditched. I believed that few would understand my speech and I was too embarrassed to go in front of the Daughters of the American Revolution and the entire school. My English teacher was very disappointed because she wanted an Asian to make that speech... She had confidence in me and she had earlier gotten me a job as Art Editor for the Wildcat newspaper."

Things were getting better for the Kuromiya family. Hiroshi graduated from Monrovia-Arcadia-Duarte High School near 1935. Yosh followed in 1941 and went on to PJC as an art major. Hiroshi had a pre-planned engagement party with his fiancé, Emiko, from Los Angeles – on Pearl Harbor Sunday.

World War II's Executive Order 9066 led to the unjust forced evacuation of Japanese Americans. Along with other Americans of Japanese descent living in Monrovia, the Kuromiyas were transported to Heart Mountain concentration camp in Wyoming. Emiko gave birth to a son, Steven Kiyoshi Kuromiya, a *Sansei* – or third generation American, in camp.

Yosh became one of 63 members of Heart Mountain's Fair Play Committee, a group of conscientious draft resisters. When he got his draft notice, Yosh felt "insulted" as an American unfairly denied his civil rights. He turned 21 in the Cheyenne County Jail. Yosh recalls, "I was a resister as a matter of principle. After what my government did to us, I could not be in the military and kill others because they were in a different uniform. This was beyond my feelings of humanity. I couldn't do it. We lost our individual identities. We were given a family number by our government. But the draft board put my personal name on my draft letter. I had to answer it. If nobody else agreed with my decision, so be it. I'm not willing to kill nor die until my government squared things with me." He served three years in a federal prison on McNeil Island. Yosh was pardoned by President Harry S Truman in 1947.

To be a resister of conscience took huge courage, especially in the Japanese American community. The Japanese American leadership pressured young Niseis to join the U.S. military in an attempt to prove their American loyalty. Most of these Niseis, recruited from concentration camps, served in a racially segregated combat unit, the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. The 442nd RCT is the most decorated unit of its size in U.S. military history. In less than two years of combat, the unit earned more than 18,000 awards, including 9,486 Purple Hearts, 4,000 Bronze Stars and 21 Medals of Honor.

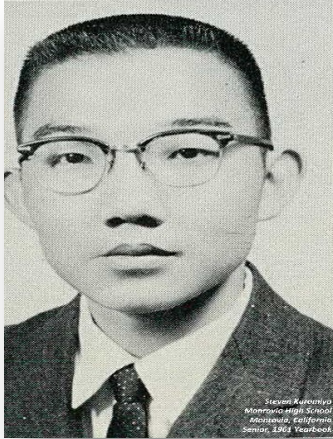
Yosh explained, "My father never supported me verbally. But I felt connected to him and he was my inspiration. I felt he would've done the same thing but he couldn't because he was considered [by the government] as an 'enemy alien'. I related to my father in a silent way as I didn't speak Japanese. I also felt close to [my nephew] Kiyoshi. The three of us have birthdays within days of each other so maybe we could communicate at a different level."

Yosh also said, "Our landlord neighbor on Primrose – Nettie Showers – promised they would keep our property for us even though we were interned. They did have to rent it out because of the housing shortage during the war years. But when my parents and sisters came back to Monrovia [in 1946], Nettie evicted the other tenants so we could have a place to live. Of course, I was still in jail." After the war, Yosh Kuromiya earned a degree at Cal Poly Pomona and became a landscape architect. He and his family lived in the Alhambra area.

Photo: Draft resister Yosh Kuromiya (seated, center) was a member of the "Poster Shop Gang," designing and printing posters at the Heart Mountain concentration camp, one of ten such camps where Americans of Japanese ancestry were unjustly imprisoned during World War II. Photo: Kuromiya Family Collection. Reprinted from NikkeiDiscover.org.



STEVEN KIYOSHI KUROMIYA (1943-2000)



Steven Kiyoshi Kuromiya, was a *Sansei*, a third generation Japanese American. His grandfather had been a truck farmer in Monrovia and Arcadia. His Uncle Yosh was a draft resister during World War II, a way to protest the unjust internment of all Japanese Americans. Kiyoshi was conceived in Monrovia but born in Wyoming concentration camp in 1943. The family returned to Monrovia in 1946.

After the war, Kiyoshi's father, Hiroshi, worked in produce and Kiyoshi graduated with honors from Monrovia High School in 1961. He was Vice President of the History Club and Art Editor of the Monrovia yearbook.

After high school, Steven was admitted to several universities and went on scholarship to the University of Pennsylvania just as the 1960s civil rights movement was at its height. He joined Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee). In a publicity tactic, Kiyoshi posted leaflets on campus that he intended to burn a dog on the steps of the school library. When thousands arrived to protest such cruelty, Kiyoshi said, "Congratulations on your anti-napalm protest. You saved the life of a dog. Now, how about saving the lives of tens of thousands of people in Vietnam?"

In March of 1965, Kiyoshi was one of a handful of Asian Americans fighting for African American voting rights in Selma. Kuromiya was leading a high school student group to the State Capitol in Montgomery when he was brutally clubbed by Alabama state troopers on 16 March 1965.

Peter Cummings reported on 24 March 1965 in *The Harvard Crimson*, "Within seconds, the quiet streets were filled with screams. The horses rode straight into the crowds on both sides of the street... One boy, Steven K. Kuromiya, an architectural student at the University of Pennsylvania, held his ground. Four horsemen converged on him, clubbed him to the ground, and rode over him. Curled in a fetal position, Kuromiy[a] tried to cover his head with his arms as unmounted deputies clubbed him, and kicked him in stomach and groin. Finally, they left him, as blood streamed in glistening lines across his face and formed a scarlet pool on the sidewalk."

Kiyoshi is quoted to say, "I was in the South during the spring and summer of 1965. After Reverend James Reeb was killed, we marched and I was clubbed down and hospitalized. When you get treated this way, you suddenly know what it is like to be a Black in Mississippi or a peasant in Vietnam. You learn something about going through channels then too. I gave my story to an FBI agent in the hospital. He took seven pages of notes, but I remember thinking at the time it was probably just about as effective as relaying information to the ACLU via the House Un-American Activities Committee. Nothing ever came of it, at any rate." However, records show that FBI monitored Kiyoshi Kuromiya from 1960 to 1972.

Kuromiya became close to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and during the week of King's funeral, Kiyoshi helped to care for the King children in Vine City.

Kiyoshi's 93-year old Uncle Yosh reflected, "I've always felt good about Kiyoshi. I couldn't pretend to understand Kiyoshi's commitment but I sensed a camaraderie with him... I remember Kiyoshi would comment on the irony that he was conceived in Monrovia, born in Wyoming, and although the West Coast was considered cosmopolitan and liberal, he sensed that there was no room for him here. He felt exiled from Monrovia. He felt he was exiled even before he was born. No wonder he was dedicated to civil rights."



Monrovia High School Yearbook 1961

Kiyoshi was involved in the gay rights rallies by the early 1960s. After the 1969 Stonewall Riots in New York City, Kiyoshi helped launch the multiracial Gay Liberation Front (GLF) in Philadelphia. In 1988, Kiyoshi was a charter member of Philadelphia's ACT UP, AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power. At about the same time, he founded Critical Path Project in Philadelphia. With the mantra "knowledge is power," Critical Path established an online clearinghouse for AIDS patients and researchers worldwide. Both of these organizations continue to bring awareness and solution paths to the AIDS/HIV pandemic. Kiyoshi took one further step to help people with HIV/AIDS; he was lead plaintiff in *Kuromiya v the United States of America* (1999), a class action suit in the U.S. Supreme Court to legalize the use of medical marijuana.

Kiyoshi said that it was at Monrovia High that he came to realize that "even more important than my racial identity was my gayness." As a Japanese American, he had rocks thrown at him on the way to grade school. He said that when he was 11 years old, he was caught by the Monrovia Police with a 16-year old boy. Kuromiya was sent to juvenile hall for three days and gained notoriety as a young Japanese

American in jail. Kuromiya said the judge “told me [and my parents] that I was in danger of leading a lewd and immoral life... I spent two years trying to find a definition for the word ‘lewd’, but I couldn’t figure out how it was spelled, so I was in the dark as to what my future held for me.”

Kiyoshi Kuromiya was a man of many talents. He was a nationally ranked Scrabble player and a Kundalini yoga master. He maintained interest in architecture and Asian American issues. He was also a food critic. He worked with futurist R. Buckminster Fuller on the book, *Critical Path* (1982), published after Fuller’s death.

His Uncle Yosh tells of a picnic the family attended in the 1970s, “So here comes Kiyoshi in his sandals and pigtails – looking like a hippie – to a conservative church picnic. I enjoyed it. I too always felt out-of-place but I could never do what Kiyoshi did... I learned about myself from Kiyoshi’s actions. He was so ahead of me; he became my teacher...”

Kuromiya died on 10 May 2000, one day after this 57th birthday. He had been diagnosed with AIDS in 1988. Uncle Yosh – the one who also went against the expected - summed it up, “Kiyoshi did what he had to do in spite of all. He had to fulfill his own goals despite his family being very confused.” Perhaps now Monrovia can proudly claim the Kuromiya family as hometown heroes.



*Photo: Kiyoshi Kuromiya, Gay Rights Activist. Reprinted from
www.them.us/story/themstory-kiyoshi-kuromiya*

Written By Susie Ling and reprinted mostly from the 2016 *Monrovia Historical Museum newsletter*.