



Fresno Bee/Perry Huffman

# A flame lighted behind barbed wire

By YUZURU (JOHN) TAKESHITA  
Special to The Bee

**T**here is living quietly in Fresno a retired school teacher whose name is Mrs. Margaret Gunderson. This letter is dedicated to her from a student who was inspired by her some 40 years ago at a high school in an American concentration camp in Northern California.

An American citizen of Japanese ancestry, I was incarcerated behind barbed-wire fences for four years, along with thousands of others of similar background who lived on the West Coast when war broke out in the Pacific in 1941.

Mrs. Gunderson, with her husband, had given up her teaching post in the Bay area and had joined the teaching staff at a high school in one of the 10 concentration camps. I think she believed that we as Americans deserved the best in public education that America could offer in spite of, or maybe because of, the fact that we were there as victims of the American system gone awry. She was my homeroom and United States history teacher during my last two years in high school, which I entered and graduated from in camp.

In high school we were a rebellious bunch, confused and angered by our internment as untrustworthy citizens by the very system we had learned in civics courses earlier to cherish and defend as the best in the world, based as it was on the principles of justice and liberty for all. Mrs. Gunderson took our inevitable cynicism in stride. But, through her lectures on early American history which revealed her strong faith in the essential goodness of the American way, she slowly converted many of us into true believers, once again, of the basic tenets on which this nation of ours was built.

I can still hear her words: "Democracy is a goal our founding fathers set for us as worthy of pursuit; it is the responsibility of every citizen, whatever the circumstance, to protect it against any encroachment and to work toward its perfection." It was in this spirit that she had us read Gunnar Myrdal's "American Dilemma," just published then, and convinced us that we had indeed a long way to go in fulfilling our nation's ideal. Her arguments were so persuasive that we, who were no less victims of our society's imperfection, found ourselves condemning what we had done to our black brethren.

## First person singular

*First Person Singular will use personal recollections and remembrances, stories with an historical theme and opinion pieces. Neither fiction nor poetry will be accepted. Contributions may be sent to First Person Singular, The Fresno Bee, Fresno, CA 93786.*

It was clear to us that her decision to join us in camp was her way of protesting what the system she deeply believed in had done to us. Ironically, I am convinced that I learned more about the true meaning of America, as embodied in our Declaration of Independence and our Bill of Rights, in a high school behind barbed-wire fences, with our basic civil rights temporarily denied, than had this incarceration, which forced us to grapple with the most fundamental issues of what it means to be an American, not occurred and had I not had the guidance and inspiration of Mrs. Gunderson as my teacher at that time. Those were dark days, with our fate in our own country unknown for a long while, but Mrs. Gunderson gave us hope in our daily classes that, in spite of what had happened to us,

the American system has the potential of fulfilling every freedom-loving person's dream if her or she is but willing to work incessantly toward its perfection.

She recently wrote to me: "You can take the teacher out of the classroom, but you can't take the classroom out of the teacher." As a student whose outlook on life in America changed from utter despair and cynicism to responsible optimism and commitment to the protection of civil rights, no matter whose, only because he had an inspiring teacher, I would like to say to Mrs. Gunderson: "You can take the teacher out of the classroom, but you can't take her out of the student whose life she changed."

A belated expression of gratitude long overdue but no less sincere, let me say publicly through this letter: "Thank you ever so much, Mrs. Gunderson! You lighted a flame that still burns in me. I pray from afar for your continued health and happiness."

I would like to sign this letter with the name she gave me at the end of the war, after a grandfather she adored.

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(Tri-State High School, Class of '45)

**Yuzuru (John) Takeshita is a professor of population planning in the school of public health at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Margaret Gunderson and her late husband, Martin, left their teaching positions in Oakland in the summer of 1942 to take posts at the Japanese internment camp at Tule Lake, he as an administrator and she as a teacher of English and history. She says they went as a protest against the policies of the American government, and suffered for their actions, being called "Jap lovers" by the residents of Tule Lake, and being refused service by merchants in the area. When the camp closed in 1946 following the end of World War II, the Gundersons**

**went to Five Points, he as superintendent of the school and she as his "Girl Friday." Martin Gunderson died in 1958. His wife, by then principal of the school, stayed another seven years. She moved into Fresno and taught the girls at Fresno County Juvenile Hall for four years. She retired in 1969. Margaret Gunderson, now 81, has maintained close ties with several of the young men who were her students at the Tule Lake internment camp. Among them is a professor at Pennsylvania State University, a pediatrician in Seattle, a researcher for the Navy, a researcher at Stanford University, an officer in the Navy, and Takeshita, a professor at Michigan.**