

Mas Hatano

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Masayuki Hatano greets a friend with his elbow Tuesday in Sacramento, during his 92nd birthday party.

Bike Hikers celebrate WWII internee's birthday

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Masayuki "Mas" Hatano has been alive for nearly a century and has a story that never seems to end.

He was imprisoned as a teenager during World War II in the Japanese American concentration camps. He served in the Korean War. He volunteered for more than 20 years at the California Railroad Museum and California Museum. He's given dozens of talks about life in internment. He's donated 17 gallons of blood. And he's also clocked in thousands of miles on his bicycle with the Sacramento Bike Hikers, where he led bicycling tours throughout California, Japan and China.

Because of the coronavirus pandemic, Hatano has been sheltering in place since March. So on Tuesday, Hatano's friends at SBH arranged to honor his 92nd birthday with a ride-by party, some of them biking from over 30 miles away to see him from a distance.

Hatano sat in a lawn chair under a tree, resplendent in a bright orange and yellow SBH jersey. Despite the years, Hatano was alert, engaged



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Andrew Chandler, a long-time friend of Masayuki Hatano, wishes him a happy 92nd birthday on Tuesday from his car in Sacramento.

and upbeat, with a distinct three-tone, high-pitch laugh. He can still walk, albeit with a cane, and he's been living alone at Greenhaven's Asian Community Center after his wife died 10 years ago.

Michelle Fortes, a retired University of California, Davis instructor who met Hatano through SBH, organized the party after seeing how much Hatano's social life had been reduced by the coronavirus order. Hatano gave talks about internment to her students for 10 years, Fortes said, always using the same old slide projector.

"I thought, you know, 'I bet people would come out

for Mas,'" Fortes said. "They'd just love to see him because he's so special. It's the least I could do."

THREE YEARS OF INCARCERATION

Hatano was born on June 9, 1928, in Sacramento and raised in Loomis, one of four children born to immigrant parents from Japan.

In May 1942, Hatano, then in eighth grade, went outside for recess and saw a poster taped to the school building. It was a notice from the U.S. War Department. Standing in the schoolyard with classmates, Hatano read he was going to be incarcer-

ated the following week.

Hatano and his family were sent to the Tule Lake Relocation Center, one of the largest and most oppressive of the country's 10 concentration camps. Almost 30,000 Japanese Americans were held there over the course of four years, two-thirds of whom were American citizens.

A few weeks after arriving, Hatano turned 14. He was held prisoner at Tule Lake for three years.

"We thought we might be kept there for the rest of our lives," Hatano said.

The camp quickly became overpopulated, he said, and the unsanitary conditions, insufficient medical care and unsafe working conditions caused several prisoner protests.

"The older people, they lost everything," Hatano said. "(My parents) immigrated here and, at that time, the immigration laws prevented them from ever becoming citizens. So they thought that they would be shipped back to Japan."

There were activities to keep internees busy and quell unrest, Hatano said, such as basketball, baseball and flower arrangement classes. The younger people had school, although their classrooms were in empty army barracks and they didn't have enough books or paper.

But looming in the background, Hatano said, was the reality that no one in the camps was truly free.

SEE 92ND BIRTHDAY, 7A

FROM PAGE 3A

92ND BIRTHDAY

"The thing that always was on your mind is, 'we're prisoners,'" Hatano said. He pointed his cane at a fence surrounding a soccer field across the street. "Like this fence, can't go near that fence. There were guard towers, and the American soldiers."

"And so we came to adapt to this abnormal situation, and try to make it as normal as we can."

The Supreme Court ruled in 1944 that loyal U.S. citizens could not be detained, and by 1946 the Tule Lake concentration camp was closed. Everyone was told to go home, Hatano said, but many of them had been forced to abandon or sell their property when they were incarcerated.

"Where are they going to go? They lost their homes, they lost everything," Hatano said. "It's like telling a homeless person, 'go home.'"

Internees were given \$25 and a train ticket, so Hatano's family went to a hostel set up in a Sacramento high school gymnasium. A few years later, Hatano was drafted into the Korean War.

On how he felt to be forced to fight for a country that imprisoned his family without trial, Hatano was matter-of-fact.

"We didn't have too many choices," Hatano said. "They applied the law to us like we did not go into the camps. You can't refuse to be drafted, you go to prison ... A lot of

people just like myself, we couldn't fight it."

LIFE AFTER CONCENTRATION CAMPS

Re-entering society was difficult, Hatano said. Japanese Americans still faced discrimination after their release, and jobs were hard to find. But he finished school, graduating from what's now known as Sierra College in Rocklin. His first job after graduation was at the California Department of Transportation. He was initially paid \$250 a month, but worked his way up to become a manager and licensed civil engineer.

In 1957, he married Violet, a teacher who was also incarcerated in the internment camps. Together, they raised three sons and were "very strict," according to Hatano's youngest son, Gary, 54.

Though his father mellowed with age, Gary Hatano said, one habit he never lost was pinching pennies. His father once made him wait in line for half an hour at a Costco gas station to save 50 cents.

Alan Hatano remembered his father always made time to help him with Little League batting practice after work.

"At the time, I appreciated it," said Alan, 59. "Then, I got older and became a father, and realized how hard it is to rush home and be there for your kids like that."

For many people, life slows after retirement. For Hatano, it was prime time for civic and community engagement.

He joined the California Railroad Museum volunteer program, where he led more than 80 overnight train tours from Sacramento to Reno and gave talks at the California Museum's exhibit on Japanese internment for 18 years.

Although donating 17 gallons of blood to Blood-Source Midtown may sound like plenty, he was actually aiming for 20. He didn't give up any of his community service until last year, when he had a ministroke.

"I always thought that I needed to be doing something and helping other people in the process," Hatano said. "Now, I just do very simple things ... I go across the street (to a senior center) and help stuff envelopes."

A LIFETIME OF FITNESS

What's the secret to keeping everything running smoothly in your 90s? Lots of exercise, Hatano said.

"He never sat down watching TV," Gary Hatano said. "He was always working out, doing push-ups, moving around. And that's why he's 92 today."

Hatano joined SBH after he retired in his 60s. He got antsy, he said, and liked having people to ride and socialize with. His peak came in his 70s, when he was biking more than 7,000 miles a year and held the club record for five years. He didn't slow down until he was

80, when he traded the bicycling for walking 2-3 miles a day.

At his birthday party, Hatano bumped elbows and canes with his old friends. A table was laid out with a small cake, pasta salad, streamers and balloons. By mid-morning, a group of about 20 had come by bearing gifts and their dogs.

"Hey, Uncle Mas!" Hatano's niece shouted from a car full of kids, with "Happy Birthday!" written on the windows with a grease marker.

Terri Hottman, 72, of Sacramento, said she used to jokingly scold him for being reckless in his old age. He fell off a ladder in his 70s while gardening, she said, and had to be helped up by his wife.

"He said, 'I was laying there on my back in the grass thinking, 'Well I'm not dead, I guess I'm OK.' I'm like, 'Mas, why are you on a ladder?'" Hottman laughed.

"It's a real honor to know him. I can't imagine life without him, to be honest. He's an amazing man."

Though he was imprisoned by the U.S. for unfounded suspicions of treason, Hatano's story fits the classic lore of the American Dream - surviving one of the nation's darkest chapters to work his way to success, followed by decades of giving back to his community.

"And so the way I look at it is, well, things could be worse," he said "... I consider myself lucky."

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TRB meeting 1978



First Summer TRB Meeting, Seattle, July 19, 1988.