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ORIGINAL

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To: Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians
& Community Committee on Redress and Reparations
318 6th Ave. S. Seattle, Wa. 98104

Re: Wm. "Bill" Kawata
former P.O.W.

WORLD ENDS AT AGE 8

When I first learned that Mom was dead at 5:00 am., I was only eight years old. The Doctor told me that she had been dead for several hours and the only reason she had some warmth in her body was because I slept next to her while nursing her. I refused to believe she was dead at only age 38. How could Mom leave me already? My world was shattered, gone, she was all I had. The shock has stayed with me and since there were flowers and many ribbons wrapped for her in remembrance. I have always associated still to this day, flowers with Mom and her death including ribbons. Even the fragrance of flowers have always brought me sadness, yester years and even today.

STARTING A NEW LIFE WITH A NEW FATHER

As Mom knew she was dying, she wrote to my Dad who was working in Alaska when she became ill. I was excited to learn that my Dad was coming. He arrived about a week before her death. I realized later that everyone knew Mom was going to die but me.

When Mom died, I wondered if Dad would be able to take care of me. Mom did everything and more. All the washing, ironing, cooking, paid for cultural lessons, cleaning, worked at a restaurant early in the morning till late at night, and even took care of the garden and all household chores. How could a father replace a mother?

Little did I know that in three years there would be another devastating separation again between parent and child. Dad and I left for Seattle where I was born and I attended grade school there for a couple of years. I felt like I was really living now because all my weekends were spent in a movie theater and I got 2 comic books a week. With Mom, it was a movie once a month and a choice of a candy bar or an ice cream once a week. She had to work so hard to take care of not only me but there were 3 step-sisters and 3 step-brothers. Even then I knew it wasn't a family. I always felt like an outsider which made it hard on Mom and my step Dad. Mom loved me so much that it crushed her when I missed a Saturday lesson and she spanked me with a board (which I never forgot), and later discovered that there were nails in it. My seat was bloody.

LEAVING FOR ALASKA BEFORE WORLD WAR II BREAKS OUT IN 1940

Dad told me that we were going to Alaska as he was going to work for his best friend, who operated a grocery store. I was able to adjust to that small town since I grew up with mostly Caucasian kids and it was very natural for me. It wasn't long before you would almost know everyone since Wrangell, Alaska was so small.

THE TERRIBLE WAR

Suddenly in December 1941, not remembering all the details, my life became almost unbearable. It was pure misery to go through such discrimination, having to face this all alone as there were no other Japanese-American kids around. Being teased, feeling resentment at school and in the town you lived in was like a night mare. I was made to feel ashamed. I lost interest in school and didn't want to attend any longer. It got worse each day and I could hardly wait for the day to end then I hated to look at the next day as I knew it would be as bad . There was no place to hide or escape all this humiliation. I had to live with severe humiliation for something that I had no part of or responsibility too. As a child I was blamed for a war which I knew nothing of. I didn't even know the enemy.

DAD IS TAKEN TO JAIL AT GUNPOINT

It wasn't long that after the war started that the town sheriff came armed to the house we were staying at and took Dad to jail at gunpoint like a common criminal. There was no announcement of this act... I remember trembling with rage and feeling helpless and scared. There was no difference between this and the Gestapo. How could we be treated like this in America? I began to resent giving my pledge allegiance to the flag.. No, it wasn't fair, No there was no liberty, no freedom, we were not equal, there was no justice for all. I was depressed on how Americans could lie about their pledge of allegiance. I had lost mom.... now I had lost dad and in both cases, they were all I had. They were both taken away, Mom by death and now Dad by force from my own government, my country, I was a citizen. At 11, I wondered if I would ever see my father again. All kinds of horror things went through my mind.

LIFE WAS OVER AT AGE 11

After being able to play sports, sledding in lots of snow, having fun like all kids, it would never be the same anymore. I resented my former friends passing judgement on me, making me feel like I was a threat to my country. I was guilty without trail, without evidence. It seemed like it was the same as Nazi Germany. I had no representation, I was vulnerable, helpless, and in total despair. Frustrated and alone again, I learned that I was going to be shipped on a convoy to an internment camp. I wondered if Dad was going to go with me... Every day was a shock to me. I began to feel numb over all this trauma, it seemed like a bad dream, I wanted to wake up.

DARK DAY OF EVACUATION

Approximately in February or March of 1942, as a 11 year old leaving precious possessions behind were things like a B-B gun, sled, marbles, some clothes and comic books. I was placed in the hole of a convoy ship and it was scary. No knowing how to swim, I feared if we were torpedoed, I was a goner for sure. I hoped that Dad was safe. He was 61 yrs. old. As the ship stopped to pick others up, I noticed that these people had their fathers, they even had their mothers. Some were even more fortunate, they had sisters and brothers. They all had family. I did not know if I should approach them as I felt I may intrude. It was not a time in my life that I had confidence. I still felt alone and vulnerable having no one to share this situation with.

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ORPHANED BY MY OWN GOVERNMENT

It was difficult to accept being orphaned this way, by my own country. I had learned through my schooling that we had this marvelous country filled with opportunities, freedom, and fairness. My frustrations continued when I learned that they shipped Dad off to another camp far away. We were now totally seperated.

ARRIVAL AT CAMP HARMONY, INTERNMENT CAMP

Being from Alaska, we were the first to be interned. You couldn't help notice the serveillance of the barbed wires, the watch towers with spotlights, and the armed guards. I never noticed if any of my fellow prisoners were dangerous. Everyone looked very passive and cooperative. I still felt very American, that's all I knew. I was now a prisoner with restrictions on what to eat, when to eat, where to eat, and getting used to no privacy was most difficult to a shy, helpless kid, who wasn't sure of anything.

When I reflect on the outrage of America about the publicized hostages held by Iran, my fellow prisoners and I were worse off. At least they were held as hero's, they had the support of our country, they knew they were servinc their country and they had their honor, their self-esteem. When the release came, they had recognition, appreciation, honor. They did not have to endure the disgrace for 4 years in a camp made by your own country. They had dignity, I did not. My fellow prisoners suffered this too and it was to continue for the rest of our lives because we were all disgraced. We became and stayed below standard citizens. We were never honored for our loyalties to satisfy the majority of Americans, only a few. All of us were basically shy, humble, non assertive, but yet faithful and loving America. This was the only country I knew and cared for.

To be made to feel I was a traitor, being alienated, abandoned, dishonored, it was hard to bear. Even as a kid, I felt the harshness. None of even thought about burning the American flag, no demonstartions, never to dishonor our country regardless what happened to me and others. This was totally over looked.

I was getting down to my last pair of socks and it was traumatic for me. To wear shoes without socks. This was humiliating for me too and caused a severe complex. I felt ashamed all the time I was without socks. No one else had this problem. If there were others it would of been some relief. I was hard up and couldn't conceal my plight. I wished we could of all had uniforms so we could be looking equal but even here in camp, I was below my fellow prisoners and it showed. There was no way to conceal my hardship which was always an embarrassment.

As more and more people poured into camp, I always hoped that my Dad would be among them. When the camp filled, there was no Dad. He wasn't among them. I know what lost dogs feel like. No one cares, you become a liability. Everyone had their own problems, who could take on more? These were crucisl times. I felt worse than my fellow prisoners as I could not compete in any way emotionally nor economically with anyone. My self worth was declining daily. Additional problems to cope with were the fear of deadly snakes, ticks, and the wild enviornment of trying to settle in a man made camp. I was even teased and scared

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by my fellow prisoners who had to have their fun on me too. I couldn't escape from being picked on from the outside as well as the inside. I noticed the ones who were never picked either had power, influence, or prestige. It was the vulnerable ones that were the easiest to be picked. There were bullies in camp too.

BEING FORCED TO ACCEPT HANDOUTS

It was apparent that I was going to need help to survive. Shelter and food were provided for but I needed clothes. I remember the shame I felt being forced to go to the Red Cross (bless them) for the clothes I was able to get there. I hoped no one would ever know or see me there.

Since there was no health care, my teeth became a problem. Not understanding how to care for my teeth and not being able to afford dental care, it was expensive for me later to face extractions and needed dental work. I am thankful to all those kind people that helped me in my days in camp. I still feel indebted and I hope that I can make some return contribution to others.

EXPERIENCES OF A CONCENTRATION CAMP AS A CHILD

Personal humiliation that no one else could understand or had to experience has left its marks and scars. We all lived in what was referred to as a block, which consisted on twelve barracks. There was one dining hall for everyone to share, one laundry room, one rest room and shower for men and women separate and there was simply no privacy. No one age 11 was seen having to wash their clothes on a washing board. I dreaded this. I felt like a sissy and it was okay for the other men as they were bachelors and older. But only women did the washing. I had no iron and my clothes always looked like I had slept in them. How I wish I had a older sister, a Mother would do just fine. I envied others with families. The high light of my weekends would be looking forward to listening to the "Hit Parade" at a friend's house.

I continued to write to the President of the U.S. to ask if my Dad and I could be together. It took a long time before we finally were told that we could be together. It was well over a year before he arrived. When I saw Dad, I was shocked at seeing him so thin. I asked how much weight he lost. It was 50 lbs. He aged but we were together. I resented all the physical sufferings of Dad. I would have rather taken the abuse for him as he was old. I did appreciate my Dad.

SURVIVING IN CAMP

As farm labor needed help due to the war efforts, I was able to get a job outside during the summer working on a farm at .35¢ an hour. Weeding onions, potatoes and hoeing endless rows under the hot sun made me wish I were back in camp at times but I had to take it. As I grew older, I was able to get jobs during the summer in farm labor camps and even when it required fellows older than my age. I found out I bit off more than I could chew as I was no match to work with boys that had size and strength to cut sugar beets all day, to

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pick potatoes, which both were back breaking and both jobs required physical endurance. I was dragging my feet and had to admit I was not keeping up with the older and stronger guys. At times I thought I would die from over work.

I finally got a job working in the kitchen one summer of a labor camp. I was thrilled that even though all the men were like fathers to me, it wasn't a back breaker. I could eat well, it was nice to be around good food. I didn't mind making lunches for the labor crew, cleaning pots and pans, mopping the kitchen floors, peeling vegetables, doing anything that the older people wanted me to do. I didn't ache all over when I went to bed every night like before on my other jobs.

I finally had some change in my pockets and it felt great. I walked miles to see a movie as I didn't want to spend a dime for bus fare. It felt great to feel free even for a temporary time.

END OF THE WAR AND THE BEGINNING OF ANOTHER

As the war ended so was our camp life. Suddenly it had to come, we now had another real war to face. It was a war to survive. I still had to finish school. Dad was over 65 yrs. old. Could he last much longer? I always had that fear. How could we make it? Where would we go, live, work, and survive? It was all scary. Many things entered my mind about wondering if other Americans would accept me. What about the students at school? Little did I know that I was severely damaged coming out of camp. We finally settled in a place like the ghetto's. I was glad that Mom did not have to live where we were, at least we were men. Living with poor black people was a new experience for me. A small apt. room, which a bed, gas stove, a chair (there wasn't room for two), was our home. It was where we ate, slept, cooked, and lived for several years. We all shared a public bath room which I remember using a lot of cleanser each time we would take a bath.

Starting high school was difficult as I wondered if I would be picked on again. At least there were others beside me that would be picked on so I found some small comfort in that. I found the students to be wonderful but I was unable to respond to their friendship for such a long time as I not knowingly was damaged and was unable to respond to better public relations. I know that my confidence was lacking among other students other than Japanese Americans. Even with them I was an introvert.

I remember not being able to converse with new students because I felt ashamed. Ashamed even where I lived. I wanted no one to visit me. I marveled at my friend's places where they had located. Every day was still a battle of survival. I delivered newspapers to earn income. I was never able to rest in work schedules. I had to survive. My father was old and I did not want to burden him with such financial responsibilities. I had hoped to help him someday if I could.

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Today I now understand why I react to some of the things and what emotions it stirs up inside of me. It's due to the ways I was treated since childhood. Having to live that way under stress, humiliation, dishonor, loss of all self-esteem, the never ending worry of survival, the sufferings of your Dad. I was never able to give my Father the comforts he deserved as he died when I was 21 yrs. old still trying to survive. I love him for doing his best and it was hard for him to lose it all which the war caused most of it.

Despite what has happened to me, my Dad, my fellow prisoners, I still would not trade this great country for any country in the world. I still love America, despite it's problems. I know it's the greatest country in the world. I don't appreciate many things but there are also many that I do appreciate. I would defend her with all the resources I have to protect her. I am lucky to have been born here and to have had the opportunities this country has afforded. I hope there can be justice for all, liberty, and the pursuit for happiness. I am glad and proud to be an AMERICAN.

Very Truly Yours,

William Bill Kawata

William "Bill" Kawata
Citizen of the U.S.A.

