

PALO ALTO

Woman detained in Japanese internment camps turns 100



DAI SUGANO — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Jean Mitoma, of Palo Alto, who was forced to live in internment camps during World War II, poses for a portrait Wednesday.

Even in toughest of times,
Jean Mitoma wants people
to 'be kind to each other'

By Aldo Toledo

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PALO ALTO » It was Mother's Day on May 10, 1942, when Jean Mitoma finally packed the last of her belongings into a cotton bag she'd sewn in school and stepped onto a Greyhound bus outside the YMCA in San Francisco.

The past six months had been grueling.

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Jean Mitoma, with husband Chozo Mitoma, daughters Cathy and Peggy in 1956 on a day trip on the Richmond-San Rafael ferry.

COURTESY OF
CAROLINE KIMIKO

Mitoma

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The dry-cleaning shop her parents had owned in San Francisco was forced to close. They lost their house and secondhand store owners had ransacked it for valuable furniture as Mitoma's family faced eminent eviction. The family dog was given to another family. Friends were disappearing. Mitoma's college career, just two semesters away from completion, was put on permanent hold.

As the four tin cups and four tin plates in Mitoma's bag rattled against the seat of the Greyhound, she deduced where she was going: Tanforan Racetrack in San Bruno.

"We heard just rumors," she said of the racetrack, which the army turned into a holding camp for the Bay Area's roughly 120,000 residents of Japanese ancestry. "Horrible rumors."

Stepping off the bus, army officials told Mitoma the track had run out of room. She'd be sleeping in a horse stall with her family, where she would spend the next five months before being transferred to an internment camp in Utah. She'd spend the rest of the war in a desert-hot, dust-filled barracks as the world passed her by.

As the most tumultuous year of many of our lives comes to an end and she reflects on her life at the eve of her 100th birthday, Mitoma spoke about her time at the Japanese Internment camps and the seemingly idyllic suburban life she'd build in Palo Alto afterward.

Born in Fukuoka, Japan on Jan. 1, 1921, Mitoma came to America as a toddler and settled just a block away from the Haight-Ashbury in San Francisco. Every summer, Mitoma would attend day camps, go shoe shopping with her mother in Union Square and roam around Golden Park.

At Polytechnic High School in San Francisco, Mitoma was the only Japanese student because "it wasn't a very mixed neighborhood," she said. She ad-

mitted that she was "probably more ignored than anything else" and wasn't bullied. She didn't go to any social events — in fact she didn't know what a senior prom was until after she graduated — and didn't feel an attachment to American school outside of getting good grades.

Aside from the pressure of competition at her Japanese school, which she would attend for a few hours after Polytechnic, "I had a good life in San Francisco," Mitoma said.

But her life there at the eve of a world war that would pit her two home nations against each other would not be without its challenges for long. Though she'd experienced some discrimination in the past, it was getting worse and more frequent.

Then everything escalated when the Japanese Empire attacked Pearl Harbor less than a month before Mitoma's 21st birthday.

"I was scared. Really scared," she said. "I stayed home most of the day and most of the days and weeks after. It was a difficult time. We just never went anywhere."

As months went by, tensions grew and the focus turned against Japanese Americans with many people accusing longtime residents with Japanese ancestry of being spies and having dual loyalty. Mitoma described seeing Japanese people burn heirlooms and newspapers, books, poems and anything else written in their language.

It was bittersweet when she got to Tanforan. On one hand she only had the clothes on her back and the small cotton bag, but at the same time she was seeing friends she hadn't seen in years.

"At first, it was exciting to be there," she said. "We saw people we hadn't seen for a long time. The kids I went to school with, I saw them there. It was a lot of mixed emotions."

Just as she was getting settled, Mitoma was uprooted again. Everyone knew Tanforan would be a temporary spot for the Bay Area's Japanese population, but no one had any idea of

where they were going after that.

Mitoma would spend the next three years in the Topaz Internment camp in Utah before being transferred to Tule Lake Internment Camp in California and then let go at the end of the war.

The day she left the camp to look for an apartment for her parents in San Francisco, her future husband, Chozo Mitoma, departed for Berkeley to finish his degree at the same time. She married him in 1950 after the Big Game between Cal and Stanford — a testament to their love of college football — and raised four children in an Eichler Home in Palo Alto she bought for \$28,000 in 1959.

She still lives there today.

In 2010, she was among the 41 Japanese American senior citizens who received honorary bachelor's degrees from UC Berkeley as they were not able to finish their degrees after being sent to the internment camps.

"She is my role model," granddaughter Caroline Jensen said. "She's faced impossible difficulty in the camps, being stripped of her independence to go to school and still kept such an amazing outlook on life being an amazing mother and grandmother."

Asked if she could share the secret to reaching the age of 100, Mitoma said "I never exercise."

She eats cereal for breakfast with orange juice and coffee, or maybe two pancakes she makes from scratch and pork sausage. She spends most of her time watching the Warriors and catches every Cal game she can.

She doesn't eat fried foods, doesn't drink and eats a lot of vegetables. But she questioned why anyone would want to reach her age.

"It doesn't excite me much to turn 100," she said. "I've appreciated everything that's happened to me in my life. I couldn't be luckier. One thing I know is how happy I am of my kids and my family."

Even in the toughest of times, Mitoma said "be kind to each other. It's the most important thing."