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Hannah Takagi Holmes, "Meet the Deaf Plaintiff"-An Adult Educator!

by Roger W. Axford

The love and concern by parents of a handicapped child is portrayed in this story of named plaintiff Hannah Tomiko Holmes (Takagi), who now lives in Los Angeles. Hannah has been deaf since the age of two, and was fourteen years old when she was attending the Berkeley School for the Deaf prior to the implementation of Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942. When she and the family members were evacuated to Manzanar on May 28, 1942, they brought the problem of the deaf children to the attention of various government officials. "My parents were desperate," says Hannah. "They sent me to the camp hospital to open up my ears." Instead, nothing could be done.

Due to restlessness and because of her interest in the subject, Hannah attempted to enroll in a flower-making class. She preferred to teach "all hearing women-not a deaf girl." Hannah then worked where they made camouflage nets. But that job ended for her because of the revolt in camp over the mysterious shortage of rations. She says with despair, "I was disappointed because I wanted to keep busy. Isolation was my worst enemy." Thereafter, Hannah spent long hours at the camp library where she read and struggled to educate herself.

Hannah was indebted to her parents, Tomokichi and Yasu, for the sacrifices made on her behalf. Leaving behind many friends at Manzanar, on May 12, 1943, the Takagi family left for Tule Lake so Hannah could attend the Helen Keller School that had been set up by the War Relocation Authority. On their way to Tule Lake, they passed through Reno, Nevada. While looking for a place to eat, they noticed a sign which read: "NO JAPS." When they got to Tule Lake, says Hannah, "I was so happy to see some deaf friends-both adults and kids." But as it turned out, the Helen Keller School was a disappointment. It was poorly organized and the pupils benefited little in acquiring education. Two months later the school was closed because of the disruption brought on by the controversial Loyalty Questionnaire where many refused to go along with questions #27 and #28. Internees from other camps were ordered to move to Tule Lake.

In early September of 1943, Hannah's parents decided to take her out of camp. The family moved to Chicago where they had her enrolled at the Alexander Graham Bell School. Hannah states that Mr. Bell's wife was deaf and he communicated with her in sign language. Hannah goes on to say, "Believe it or not, that school's policy was: 'No sign language allowed in our class.' The WRA sent me to the wrong school again."

Hannah heard that some deaf students at the Bell School worked at the Zenith Corporation. A classmate urged her to apply for a job. She says, "I went there alone and was turned down because they recognized my last name."

At Jacksonville, near the state capitol in Springfield, Hannah became the first Nisei to enroll in the Illinois School for the Deaf. This was in September of 1944. There were about 350 deaf and hearing-impaired students in the school. Everyone was friendly, the teachers were nice and knew how to deal with their students effectively. And Hannah was pleased with the school library. "It was so beautiful," she says. Unfortunately, the house-mother in Hannah's dormitory told some girls "to keep away from the Jap girl." Once more Hannah was hurt and angry. When she explained what happened to the late Dr. McCloud, she said to him: "I'm not an enemy alien as they think. I am a Japanese-American." McCloud looked glum and didn't say anything. "I became very uneasy and thought he might expel me," says Hannah. He did not, but he did fire the housemother.

Discrimination against blacks became evident to Hannah on a Sunday afternoon when Violet, a deaf black; Mary, a redhead; and she sat down at an ice cream parlor. The white owner told Mary that he would not serve ice cream to the black girl and wanted Violet to get out. They were stunned. Later, when a group of deaf football players-one of them being black-came in, they refused to accept the same type of treatment, thus forcing the owner to serve ice cream to everyone, including Violet and the black player.

When Hannah told her black friend about the government putting her and others of Japanese ancestry in camps, she refused to believe it. She wanted to know why they were allowed to share with whites the use of public facilities, while blacks had to accept separate accommodations. Hannah's reply was, "Nobody can paint you red, white, black or gold. Your appearance makes the difference."

During her schooling at Jacksonville, Hannah's father passed away. Despite her loss, the determination to catch up with her education continued. In time, graduation day arrived and Hannah was among the twenty-five deaf students who received a diploma. Yet, she was not qualified to take an examination to enter college. She

knew the California School for the Deaf was one of the best in the country. Many of their students passed their examinations and entered Gallaudet College for the Deaf in Washington, D. C.

"I strongly feel," says Hannah, "that the government was responsible for rotting all Nisei deaf children's educational goals. The government isolated them in ten different 'concentration camps.' There was no education for them at an early age. There were no friends to share their ideas with. There were no smiles. NOTHING! All the government did was create more psycho-logical problems for the deaf, which would make it difficult for them in later life.

"With no college education, I was not happy with the work I was doing and was never satisfied with myself as a second-class citizen. I was trapped in low-paying jobs which offered me no chance for advancement." Says Hannah, "While in Chicago, I worked as a candy packer, seamstress, file clerk, painter and radio assembler."

The last time Hannah saw her ailing mother alive was on October 30, 1953, before leaving Chicago. Her older sister, Ruth, and her husband took care of their mother for nine months before she died at the age of 56. Hannah's father Tomokichi, her mother Yasu, and her older brother Paul, are all buried together in Sacramento where Hannah was born. "I don't know why," says Hannah, "I always have many dreams about them-for 31 years."

Returning to Los Angeles, Hannah made new friends among the hearing and the deaf while at work in the garment and upholstery industry. Doing piece work as an upholstery seamstress and quilter paid well, but the job took its toll. She was then hired as a teacher's aide at a vocational school. Although her pay was minimal, she enjoyed teaching the skills of sewing and upholstery.

Before Hannah's teaching career ended, her toughest job was as a sewing instructor for the Vietnamese refugees. Many of them had been attorneys, teachers, businessmen, and army officers. It was hard for them to adjust. The task of teaching them was hampered-not by their inability to understand English-but by the lack of concern and support on the part of the faculty and the administration.

When her deaf husband Dwight was in Monterey Hospital for surgery, Hannah had to take time off from work to be with him. During that period, tensions mounted between the Vietnamese students and the school. The needs of the students were being ignored.

On June 17, 1978, a farewell party honoring Hannah took place in the afternoon before the graduation program. All of her Vietnamese students were invited. "It was my saddest day," she says. "I will never forget that as long as I live." Hannah was dismayed to learn later that a group of her former students filed a complaint against the school administration. However, for lack of evidence, the case was dismissed. Then Hannah herself decided to file a complaint where she accused the school of bigotry, deaf discrimination, and sex discrimination.

"For the first time in my life," says Hannah, "I felt much better by hitting back. The state and federal grants are for the needs of the students of all races. They deserve good, qualified teachers, and a good school administration. I want equality for the Asians, the deaf, and women."

Hannah ends by quoting from the plaque that is at the site of the former Manzanar concentration camp: "May the injustices and humiliation suffered here as a result of hysteria, racism, and economic exploitation never emerge again."

"Injustice, humiliation, hysteria, racism and economic exploitation still continue," says Hannah. "I know, because I was there!"

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