

A STOLEN YOUTH

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"Japanese Americans"

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EXAMINER/CHRIS HARDY

Masaru Kawaguchi in the halls of Washington High School, where he was a junior when he was sent to an internment camp during World War II.

Schools to honor Japanese whose lives war shattered

By Julian Guthrie
OF THE EXAMINER STAFF

A faded yearbook photo of 17-year-old Masaru Kawaguchi shows a gentle young man wearing wire-rim spectacles, a slightly askew bow tie and a tentative smile.

Kawaguchi's soft expression reveals nothing of the anguish and tumult of the time.

The yearbook is dated 1943, two years after Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. Kawaguchi was one of 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry who were forced by the U.S. government to hastily sell or store their belongings, evacuate their homes and relocate to internment camps encased by barbed wire and watched over by armed guards.

"High school years are supposed to be the best of your life," said the American-born Kawaguchi, who was a junior at George Washington High School in San Francisco when informed he would have to leave school. "We had our youth



A snapshot from Masaru Kawaguchi's Topaz High School yearbook of 1943 shows him, bottom right, with members of the school's intramural basketball team, who have signed their photos.

Joe the Red man

◆ JAPANESE from C-1

Diploma reparation for a stolen youth

stolen from us."

In a symbolic gesture intended to return a slice of lost adolescence, the San Francisco Unified School District in May will honor an estimated 60 former students who, like Kawaguchi, were plucked out of high school and forced into the camps for no other reason than their Japanese heritage.

On May 6, at a ceremony at the Bill Graham Civic Auditorium, the former internees will be awarded honorary high school diplomas. Witnessing the event will be some 2,000 high school juniors and seniors who have studied World War II, taken U.S. government classes and read the classic relocation tale "Farewell to Manzanar." For these students, history will come to life.

At 72, Kawaguchi, a retired Caltrans engineer who lives in San Francisco, still has the lankiness and gentle ease of his youth.

Returning to Washington High for the first time in 55 years last week, Kawaguchi walked through the long, concrete halls and found himself surrounded by memories of school days: standing by a locker talking to a friend, dashing to his homeroom class, bouncing basketballs on the gym floor.

With the afternoon sun streaming through the windows, Kawaguchi smiled as he talked about his days on the school's winning basketball team. But the smile faded, and his mood turned melancholy.

"I was taken from school mid-season," he recalled. "I would've liked to have played in the finals with my teammates. They went on to be champions."

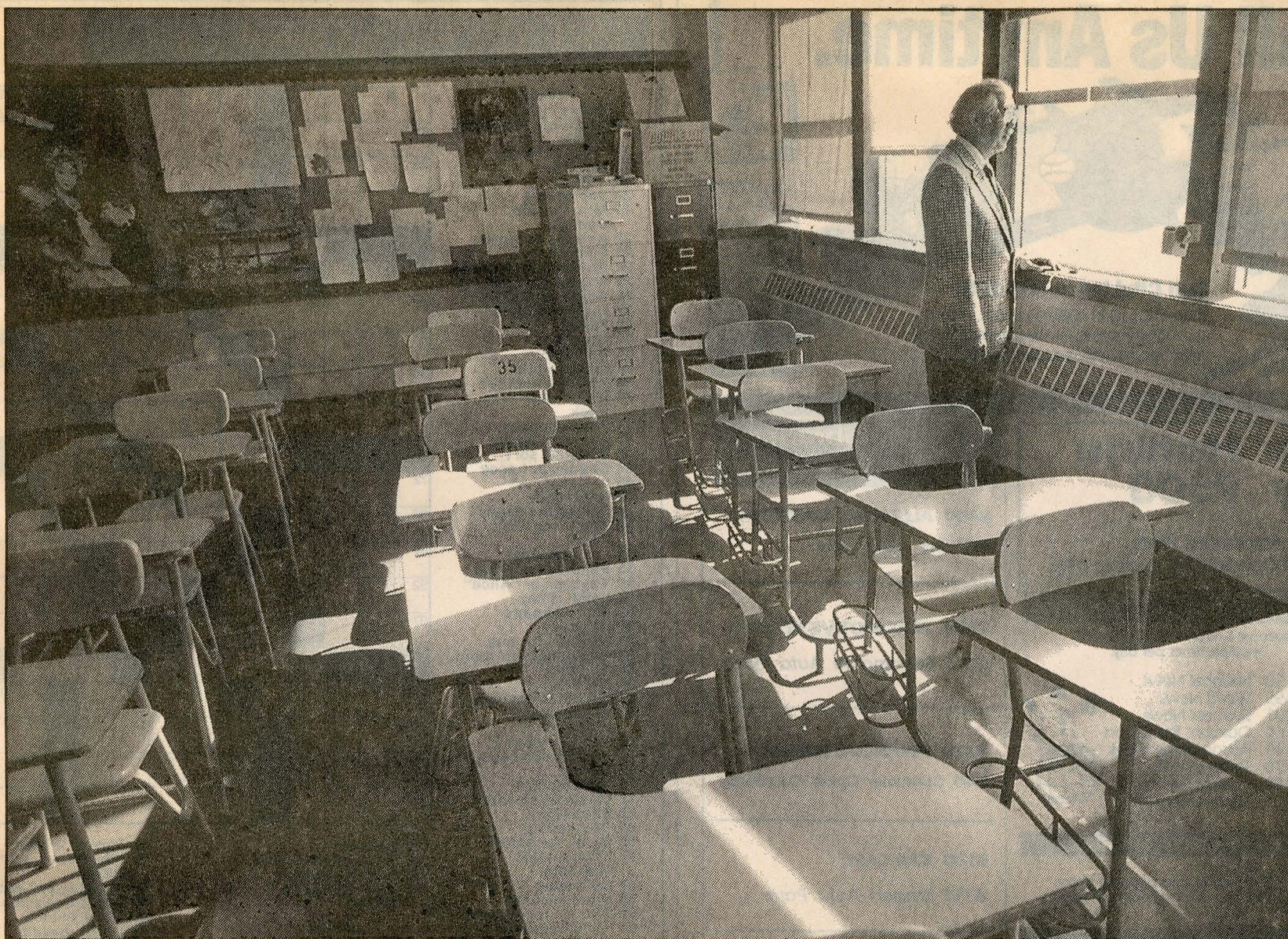
Kawaguchi, joined by three former Washington students who were also interned and still live in San Francisco, has tried to push certain memories from his mind. Still, he's not able to forget the day his teacher told him he could not return to school.

He had seen the posters plastered around his Japantown neighborhood, informing Japanese residents they had a 6 p.m. curfew, and instructing them not to venture beyond a few blocks from their homes.

"It was really strange," Kawaguchi said. "Here I was, born in America. I was an American citizen. I had attended school in San Francisco all my life. When I was told I couldn't come to school, none of my classmates said a word to me. No one said (they were) sorry. No one said they didn't want me to go."

The school was carrying out Executive Order 9066, signed on Feb. 19, 1942, by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The order called for all Japanese Americans living in the Western United States to be uprooted and placed in camps because they were considered a threat to security.

As 10 internment camps were constructed around the country, a large majority of Japanese American families from the Bay Area were temporarily placed in what was called the Tan Foran Assembly Center, at a racetrack in San Bruno.



After 55 years, Masaru Kawaguchi returns to the Washington High classroom that was his homeroom; it is now used to teach students Japanese.



Former internment campers, from left, Masaru Kawaguchi, Bette Takeshita, George Yano and Peter Kitagawa in front of Washington High School

"Our family had to live in a stable," Kawaguchi recalled. "The luckier ones got to live in barracks."

The toilets and showers had no dividers. Family members were given two blankets each. They made their bedding by filling mattresses with straw. Items like cameras, radios, knives — and family heirlooms — were taken and never

returned.

After six months in Tan Foran, Kawaguchi, his six siblings and mother and father, were put on a train and sent to a camp in Topaz, Utah, where they would live out the war.

Peter Kitagawa, 73, who was a junior at Washington High when he was sent to Tan Foran — on Mother's Day 1942 — walked the

high school halls with Kawaguchi. He's happy to be recognized with an honorary diploma but remains angry.

"Where were the bleeding hearts in 1942?" he asked.

Kitagawa, a mail carrier for 37 years, leafed through his Washington High yearbook, dated 1941, his sophomore year. He smiled over the messages penned by class-

mates: "The best of luck in '42," "You're a swell guy," "I hope you're at my study table next term," and: "Take it easy on the girls."

Bette Takeshita, 72, also returning to Washington for the first time since she was forced to leave, laughed when she saw her own photo in the yearbook. Posing with other members of the California Scholarship Federation, the young Bette stood in the front row, arms by her side, wearing a plaid dress with dark bobby socks and white tennis shoes.

"We all went into the camps," explained Takeshita, who turned sweet 16 at Topaz, "because being a minority back then wasn't what it is today. We didn't have people to stand up for us like minority groups do now, and we didn't have the clout to stand up for ourselves."

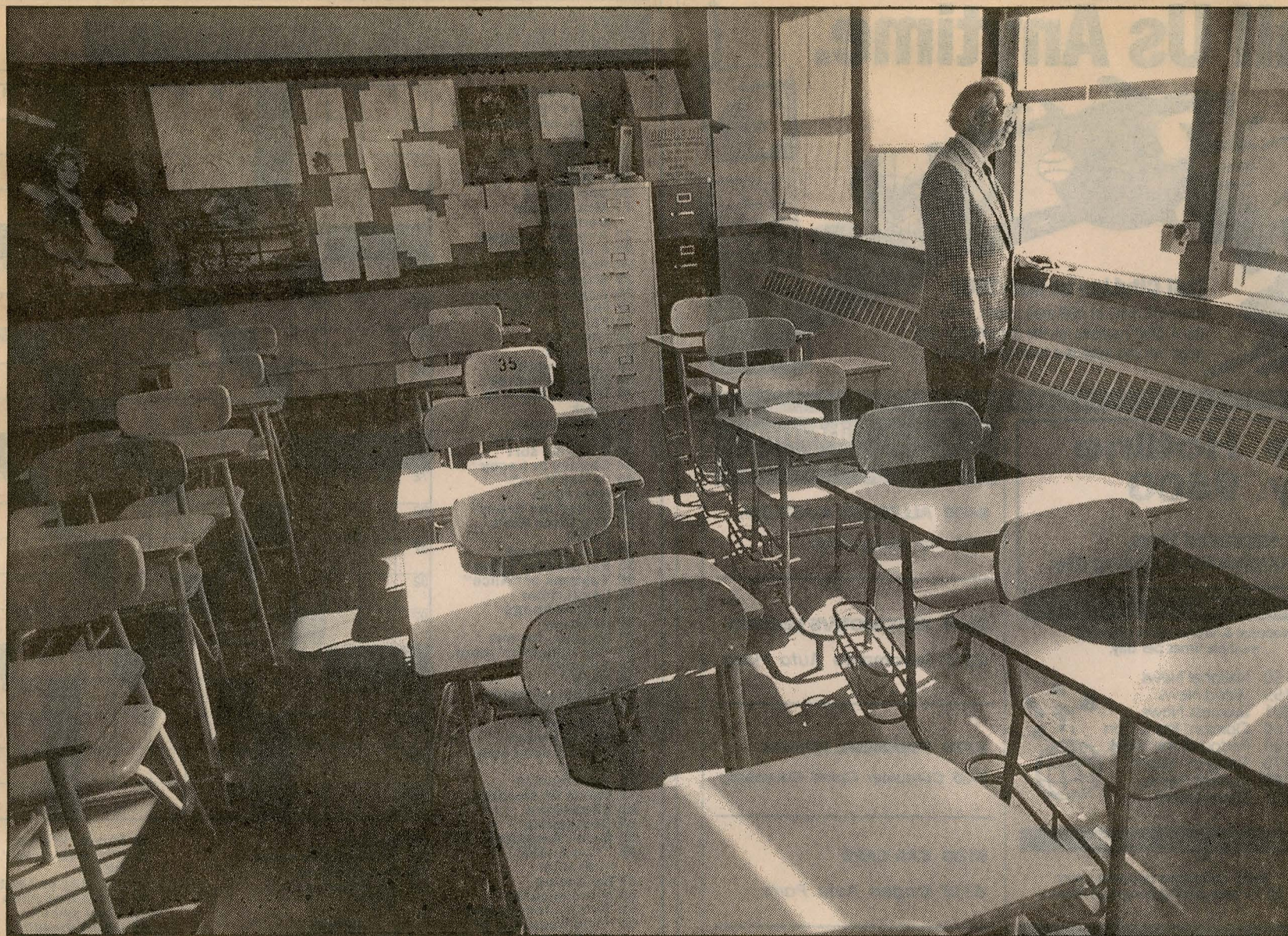
George Yano, a Washington High senior when he and his family were sent to Topaz, added, "Our authority figures were our parents. Our parents were not yet American citizens. So they didn't have many choices."

While there are 11 former Washington High students who will attend the May 6 ceremony, there will also be former high school students from Lowell, Commerce, Mission, Polytechnic, Girls and Galileo.

One former student, Jiro Nakamura, who would have graduated from Commerce High School in 1943, is flying from his home in Tokyo to attend the event.

Michi Kobi, a Lowell senior when interned, will fly in from New York.

"I'm going to the ceremony because I want there to be closure," Kobi said. "When I was interned, it



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EXAMINER PHOTOS BY CHRIS HARDY

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"I'm going to the ceremony because I want there to be closure," Kobi said. "When I was interned, it

was like the end of the world for me. I had led a good life. I was going to graduate with good grades and go on to UC-Berkeley. I had my dream shattered."

In a shaky voice, Kobi said she had gone into a "serious, zombie-like depression" at Tan Foran. "I lost my sense of identity. I had thought I was an American. When I was incarcerated, suddenly I wasn't an American. I didn't know what I was."

She said it had taken her years of psychotherapy to come to terms with what happened.

"I'd like to tell high school students that this could happen again, that their civil rights could be taken from them like it was from us," Kobi said. "When times are bad, human beings have to find a scapegoat to blame. That is human nature."

Locating former students as far flung as Tokyo and New York was the task of Dr. Steven Hirabayashi, principal of John O'Connell Technical High School.

Hirabayashi began his search in November by contacting Japanese American newspapers across the country and asking for help in publicizing the event.

Hirabayashi sees the ceremony as a way to "seek forgiveness for what happened and make amends."

Leland Yee, a San Francisco supervisor and former school board member who proposed the measure to the Board of Education in November, said he saw it as a "nice gesture for our former Japanese students to come before us and accept their diplomas. And, just as the government has made redress to Japanese Americans, we need to do our part to recognize what happened was wrong."

In March, the Civil Liberties Public Education Fund announced that it had allocated \$2.7 million to 100 organizations or individuals in 20 states to establish educational programs about the World War II internment of Japanese Americans.

This was part of the 1988 Civil Liberties Act passed by Congress, which set aside \$1.2 billion in redress payments to those interned. About 60,000 camp survivors have been paid \$20,000 each.

"The government started the healing process, and for the City of San Francisco and the Board of Education to do this is another way to make amends," said Harry Kitano, a professor of sociology and social welfare at UCLA.

A freshman at Galileo High School before being sent to Topaz, he will be the featured speaker at the May 6 ceremony.

"For a long period of time," Kitano says, "I felt shame that I had been in one of these camps. It left a lot of scars. It made me cynical about government, the Bill of Rights and the Constitution. It may mean something for someone, but it didn't provide much protection for me."

With time, Kitano said, the pain has eased, the trust has been restored.

"It's taken a long time for that to happen," he said. "But apologies must be accepted. And the high school diploma may be a perfect symbol of the healing."