

Japantown EXCELSIOR VERTICAL FILE YWCA Dispute

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PHOTOS BY LIZ HAFALIA/THE CHRONICLE

The YWCA building (top), built in 1932, is home to a preschool (above) that serves the Japanese American community

Ownership question goes to courts

By Harriet Chiang
Chronicle Legal Affairs Writer

The battle over the fate of the Japantown YWCA moved into the courts yesterday, when a group of neighborhood leaders charged the organization with abandoning a decades-old agreement ensuring the historic facility would always be used to serve the Japanese American community.

At the core of the dispute is whether the YWCA owns the building or acts as trustee on behalf of the local Japanese American community, who raised the money to buy the property 70 years ago but were barred from owning the facility because they were immigrants.

"To permit the YWCA to continue to serve as trustee would be a devastating blow . . . to the legacy and spirit of the issei (first-generation immigrant Japanese) pioneers who built the building as a permanent community resource," community leaders charged in the complaint filed yesterday.

But Linda Davis Hills, the San Francisco YWCA board president, denied that her organization violated any agreement with the Japanese American community.

"It's our building," she said as she stood in the lobby of the building in the heart of Japantown. "We know that we own it."

The suit, filed in San Francisco Superior Court, charges that the YWCA violated its legal obligations when it attempted to sell the building last year — only to back off after an outcry from neighborhood groups.

The suit alleges that the organization now wants to raise rents by 80 percent in an apparent bid to oust the current tenants: a nonprofit preschool with mostly Japanese American children and an after-school program for teenage girls from the Western Addition.

But Paige Bradley, a spokeswoman for the YWCA, said that organization had changed its mind about selling the building. **YWCA: Page A19 Col. 1**



Harlan Hamakawa, 6, is a graduate of the Nihonmachi Little Friends preschool program

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ing. It's "absolutely not" for sale now, she said yesterday.

Instead, she said the organization is going to renovate and seismically retrofit the building so that it can "enhance its programs to serve the women and girls of the Western Addition."

"This lawsuit is going to detract from the YWCA serving all the women and girls in this community," Bradley said.

The dispute traces its roots back to 1920, when a group of first-generation Japanese women, barred from participating in the YWCA because of the organization's segregation policies, decided to form their own community center.

The women scraped together

\$6,500 in cash and notes to buy a parcel of land in San Francisco so that young girls in the community would have a place of their own. They placed the title for the property with the San Francisco YWCA because California law at the time barred immigrants from owning real property. The suit alleges the YWCA agreed to hold the property in trust for the use of the newly-formed Japanese YWCA.

A new building was put up in 1932, designed by Julia Morgan, who donated her services.

The arrangement survived hard times — even during World War II when the Japanese women serving as board of directors for the center were sent to detention camps and the San Francisco YWCA voluntarily assumed control over the building at 1830 Sut-

ter Street to preserve the property.

But after more than 70 years, the relationship now appears to be falling apart.

The plaintiffs say the YWCA's minutes of its own meetings specifically state that the YWCA was to hold the property in trust for the exclusive use of the Japanese YWCA.

The community leaders charge the YWCA violated that trust when it put the building on the market in April 1996 for \$1.65 million. The YWCA "has failed to evidence any concern for or understanding of the community that built and paid for the building, and that would rightfully own it today but for the historical racism," the suit alleges.