



Solidarity Stories from Asian American and Pacific Islander Community Leaders, Asian American Leaders Table

Mike Ishii, Tsuru for Solidarity

Introduction

“What we came to find is that in standing in solidarity with other communities, we’re healing our own trauma and it’s allowing us to reframe our historical narrative”

Mike Ishii is a Japanese American leader with [Tsuru for Solidarity](#), an organization that is working to end detention sites and support immigrant and refugee communities targeted by racism, state violence, injustice and oppression in the United States. An intergenerational organization made up of elders who were incarcerated during World War II as well as their descendants, Tsuru for Solidarity first came together in 2018 as Japanese American leaders became alarmed by the proliferation of inhumane immigrant detention centers housing children and families, often in the same sites and conditions in which they and their relatives were incarcerated during World War II.

This Solidarity Story focuses on Tsuru for Solidarity’s campaign to persuade the US government from using Fort Sill as a center to house children separated from their families. Read on to learn how Tsuru for Solidarity organized in a multiracial context to prevent the use of [Fort Sill](#) to detain young people.

“Solidarity practice has been a steep and beautiful learning curve for us.”

Takeaways

1. Our histories are connected.

Much of the power of Tsuru for Solidarity's work comes from recognizing the intersecting histories of oppression that have impacted communities of color throughout US history.

Take, for instance, the group's direct action at the immigrant detention center in Dilley, Texas. The site, which detains children and families migrating largely from Central America, is just 40 miles away from Crystal City, a former concentration camp where Japanese Americans were held in the 1940s. Japanese American leaders were appalled, and many survivors of the camp at Crystal City returned to meet with migrant families who had been recently released from Dilley and Karnes.

When the survivors met, profound stories came to light as they learned about each others' histories. Many of the Central American families and Latinx organizers were unaware of the [history of the Crystal City camp](#). "I was four when I was here," one Japanese American advocate shared. "When we left, they gave us \$25 and a one-way bus ticket. I'm here to tell you today that you're going to recover from this. Don't give up hope and we will stand with you and we will help you."

Mike also shared that after the war, the fence at Crystal City was taken to the California-Mexico border and used to build the original

wall there. "Even the props of oppression are used from one community to another," explains Mike. "And then it's recycled on another community, and back and forth."

Mike also recognized critical connections between Japanese Americans and Indigenous communities, as some of the incarceration camps were built on Indigenous reservations. That was the case at Fort Sill in Oklahoma, which marked [the endpoint of the Trail of Tears](#) and became a boarding school used for the forced assimilation of Indigenous children.

2. Follow the lead of directly affected communities.

As they approached taking direct action at Fort Sill, Mike and other organizers made sure that they followed the leadership and guidance of local leaders who were directly affected.. "We didn't want to do anything without local organizers there. We needed to understand the terrain, what was going on there with law enforcement and the military, and we needed to work with local partners," Mike explains.

Tsuru for Solidarity members connected with local Indigenous, Black, Asian American, and Latinx organizers to organize two direct action events. Local leaders expressed interest in working with them when they reached out. When the Tsuru for Solidarity advocates arrived in Oklahoma for the first

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action, they met with local organizers and shared a special ceremony and exchanged gifts. “All the communities came together in that moment to basically band together in solidarity, to make this a relational moment, not a transactional moment,” Mike explains.

These relationships were critical not only for planning and centering each other’s stories, but also for safety. During a solidarity action, the groups marched together in 105 degree heat and shut down the base at Fort Sill. Unlike the first action, the police were not present, but counter protesters had gathered. Leaders with the American Indian Movement (AIM), the local Black Lives Matter movement, and United We Dream had a better understanding of the terrain and their own approaches to safety, in some cases putting their bodies between counter protesters and Japanese Buddhist monks, who were participating in the peaceful protest. “That was really the spirit of that moment of communities working together in solidarity and protecting each other,” Mike says.

Protesters carried posters with photographs of Native people, Japanese American children in camps, and immigrant children in cages, representing the connections between all of the communities. They held a huge rally under the overpass on a freeway that drew widespread attention. The next day, the governor of Oklahoma announced

they were canceling plans to bring the unaccompanied migrant children to the base.

3. Healing and transforming trauma through solidarity.

While centering directly affected communities, Mike also recognizes there is real historical trauma to be processed within his own community, which is why Tsuru for Solidarity has prioritized healing as an integral part of their solidarity actions.

“If you have history in your community of this stuff, you are processing through the intergenerational trauma while you’re trying to stand there at the gate or at the fence with another community, and all the stuff of your own history is coming up for you,” Mike notes.

One way Tsuru for Solidarity acknowledges this dynamic is by holding [healing circles](#) after every direct action so that organizers and participants can take time to debrief and process. This space is open not only to their own members but to others who are interested in cross-community healing from intergenerational traumas. This collective and shared process of healing makes solidarity transformational.

“What we came to find is that in standing in solidarity with other communities, we’re

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healing our own trauma and it's allowing us to reframe our historical narrative," Mike explains. "It's important to reframe your narrative in that — it was not the last chapter, and you will repurpose your experience for your own healing and for solidarity, and your narrative and your experience is in service of justice and transformation for everyone."

4. Show people they are not fighting alone.

"We want to be the allies that we needed during World War II."

That's what Mike hears many of his fellow advocates say about why they show up for immigrants held in detention today. Wouldn't it have made a difference then if people had come to the fences when our families were inside?

That's why Tsuru for Solidarity partnered with Haitian leaders and advocates to organize a direct action at the [Berks Detention Site](#) in Pennsylvania. Although the experience of Black immigrants and immigrant detention in the U.S. is less widely covered, the families held at the Berks site are largely Haitian. Mike later heard that families inside were actually jumping for joy during the action because they hadn't seen other Haitian people in six months. They hadn't heard Creole from the outside. It matters, Mike said, for them to know that

people were fighting for them on the outside and that we care.

"There's a way that you feel like you're fighting alone all the time," Mike notes. "That's the history of racism and colonialism — to break us apart and split us up and pit us against each other. To stand in solidarity with intention is to refute White supremacy, to refute the ways that they've tried to colonize us in our minds about ourselves and each other."

"It's actually one of the most hopeful experiences to stand in solidarity with another community. It breaks the isolation around the violence... What we noticed is that when we show up and if we do it correctly along the goals and values that are outlined, the community we stand with feels they're not fighting alone anymore."

Your Turn

Your Turn

In reading this Solidarity Story, what emotions came up for you? Did you know about the histories recounted here? Why is it important for us to know about and share our community stories/histories?

How do you approach healing as part of solidarity work? Are there practices, rituals, or symbols you incorporate into your efforts? Are there any you might want to incorporate?

How do you approach new partnerships and relationships with other communities? How do you want to show up? What is important to do or communicate?

What does it look like to center directly impacted communities?

How has practicing solidarity transformed you, your work, and/or your community?

Some quotes in this article have been edited for clarity.