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Nisei WWII Veteran Receives Honorary Degree from Compton Community College District

On October 16, WWII veteran and purple heart recipient Lawson Sakai (87) will receive one honor that has eluded him for more than 70 years—a college diploma. Sakai is one of more than 30 former Compton Junior College students who will receive an honorary degree from the Compton Community College District as part of the California Nisei Diploma Project.

In April 1942, as 120,000 Japanese Americans, residing mostly in California, were ordered by the U.S. Government into internment camps under Executive Order 9066, Sakai and his family were allowed passage to Colorado.

A day or so before the relocation effort, then-Governor of Colorado Ralph L. Carr intervened, announcing that Japanese Americans were welcome in Colorado if they had the ability and resources to make the trip. Carr is recognized for helping Japanese Americans during WWI and often spoke out in defense of their civil rights, arguing that it was inhumane and unconstitutional to place them in internment camps.

The Sakai family, who at the time lived in Montebello, Calif., belonged to the 7th Day Adventist Church which rallied behind the family and helped with their relocation to Delta, Colorado. "Our church contacted a church in Colorado which agreed to sponsor our family, so with a day's notice we packed up only what would fit in one car along with four people," explains Sakai.

On their way out of California, the Sakai family decided to stop at the Manzanar internment camp to visit some friends who had been assigned to the camp. "I think we are the only family who voluntarily went to Manzanar and were allowed to leave," says Sakai. Unfortunately, the Sakai family never did get to see their friends because once inside, a camp worker strongly suggested they leave while they still could. "We thought they might keep us, so we left with our FBI letter outlining our passage to Colorado."

Once settled in Delta, Colorado, the Sakai family worked as farm laborers and Sakai enrolled in Mesa College in Grand Junction in September 1942. Once again his studies were interrupted, but this time because of his strong desire to serve his country. Sakai wanted to enlist in the U.S. military, but was not permitted due to his 4-C Enemy Alien classification. In March 1943, he volunteered for the 442nd Regimental Combat Team (RCT) where he served in Mississippi and eventually France, until December 1945. While serving in the 442nd, Sakai was wounded four times and awarded both a Purple Heart and two Bronze Star Medals.

The 442nd RCT became the most decorated unit in U.S. military history for its size and length of service. There were more than 9,000 Purple Hearts, seven Presidential Distinguished Unit Citations, and more than 18,000 individual decorations for bravery including 20 Congressional Medals of Honor, 19 of which were upgraded from Distinguished Service Crosses in June 2000.

After the war, Sakai married his wife Mineko in 1946 and they settled in California where he once again enrolled in college at Pepperdine University. However his studies were interrupted for a third time when his father-in-law asked for his help in restarting a farming, packing and shipping business in Gilroy, Calif. The business folded after a few years and Sakai worked for several other companies after that until he opened his own travel agency in 1970. He enjoyed a successful travel business for 20 years and sold the agency in 1990.

A WWII buff and advocate of WWII veterans' affairs, today Sakai is the president of the Friends & Family of Nisei Veterans (FFNV) organization in Morgan Hill, Calif., where he has lived since 1948. The FFNV (www.ffnv.org) is a nonprofit organization formed to preserve the proud accomplishments of the 442nd RCT and to honor all veterans of the RCT.

Sakai and his wife have four adult children and seven grandchildren, five of whom have already graduated from college. "I'm so proud of my family and their accomplishments," said Sakai. "It's nice to know I will go back to my educational roots and receive a diploma after all of these years."

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About the Compton Community College District

The Compton Community College District serves the communities of Carson, Compton, Enterprise, North Long Beach, Lynwood, Paramount and Willowbrook. The District is governed by a state-appointed Special Trustee, who works with the five-member elected Board of Trustees. Board meetings are held the third Tuesday of each month and are open to the public. The District is located at 1111 E. Artesia Boulevard, Compton, CA, 90221.