Historical bill honors internees

Uprooted Japanese-Americans now able to get honorary degrees

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Alice Sumida of Portland was in her third month at the University of Oregon, hoping to become a nurse, when World War II and the internment of Japanese Americans changed her life.

She became a nurse after the war, and retired after 45 years, but never returned to Eugene.

"I wanted to continue, but I guess it wasn't meant to be," said Sumida, 84.

A bill signed Thursday by Gov. Ted Kulongoski will enable Sumida and others like her, or their surviving family members, to request honorary degrees from the state universities they were enrolled in more than 60 years ago.

"While this bill does not right the historic wrongs that were perpetrated with the internment, it does give us the opportunity to honor people whose learning was cut short because of this tragic chapter in our nation's history," Kulongoski said before signing House Bill 2823.

The bill was sponsored by Reps. Tina Kotek, D-Portland, and Brian Clem, D-Salem.

Kotek's district includes the Expo Center, which housed Japanese Americans before they went off to internment camps. Kotek's legislative assistant, Joel Fischer, worked with fellow Oregon State University student Andy Klyuna on a class project that evolved into the House bill.

For Clem, there is a personal connection. Clem's father-in-law was interned, but was not in college and has since died. Clem's grandfather was stationed on the USS New Orleans, a heavy cruiser at Pearl Harbor, when the Japanese bombed it Dec. 7, 1941.

"It's a situation where we see injustice from the past and wonder what you would have done if you were there," said Clem, who is married to Carol Suzuki, a member of the Commission on Asian Affairs. "Today we get to do a little something."

Sumida said afterward she was having a good time in college and enjoying life when the 1942 presidential order uprooted Japanese Americans from their homes.

"We left a lot of things behind," she said. "But I think we made the best of it."

She went to the Minidoka internment camp in Idaho, where she said one of her most enduring memories was of a young boy asking his mother a question.

"He said, 'Mommy, I don't like it here. This is terrible. Why can't we go back to America?'" she said. "That stayed with me and I can still see that child's eyes."
Gov. Ted Kulongoski hands a bill he signed Thursday to Alice Sumida. The bill lets Japanese-American internees receive honorary degrees from Oregon universities if they were unable to complete their educations during World War II. Sumida was a student at the University of Oregon when she was sent to an internment camp.