

**Wisdom Through a New Project Based Program:  
The Survivor Project's "Essence of Acceptance"**

By Phyllis Rosenfield and Cynthia Hayashi

For the past 10 years the Sonoma County Survivor Project created a unique form of interaction among the members of our community. Photography, oral history and educational techniques preserve the memories of county residents who experienced various losses of human and civil rights, and celebrates these individuals and their personal stories. It searches the stories for their application and meaning in the context of the problems of our own time and the future.

The Project travels to museums, universities, junior colleges and high schools with integrated resources and curriculum materials. It fits especially well with the secondary schools "Human Rights and Genocide" curriculum.

**A lot of people obviously didn't question, didn't want  
to question, weren't willing to put out the effort to  
question, for fear it would be harmful to them.**

**Irv Piotrkowski**

Among the neighbors represented are Japanese Americans, European Jews and Cambodians. Reproductions of cherished family photographs and vivid recollections of their past history provide a reminder of what they have lost. The black and white photographic portraits combined with spirited observations on the world today convey an intimate sense of their presence here and now.

"The Essence of Acceptance" is an original program of The Survivor Project that is being offered to public schools. This program is unique because it partners students and community members to help them gain a deeper understanding of the importance of civil and human rights. These are not easy lessons.

The program stresses the importance of vigilance and guarding against losses occurring within one's own community. Through the acquired knowledge of diverse experience, individuals begin to reflect upon what is happening in their own world and how these lessons might be applied. The methodology emphasizes working closely in equal status partnerships with students. Studies have shown that this process, in and of itself, helps to foster acceptance.

Each school, or school district, will carefully select three divergent populations that they consider survivors based on the civil and/or human rights losses suffered. Students take oral histories and photographs of their neighbors, people whose stories they've never heard before. With this process they come to understand how dangerous and how easily losses and pain can occur and escalate.

Our plan is to help school districts with pre/post diversity attitude assessment, gathering resources which will include speakers, books, articles, videos, etc. Project personnel will be available to help teachers set up student teams of varying backgrounds to interview and photograph selected community members, as well as assist in arranging connections or appointments with individuals who are willing to be interviewed within the community. If a Hate Crime Response or Violence Prevention component is requested, help is available to arrange to include this piece within the program.



**Irv Piotrkowski was born in post war West Germany. He is the son of a Bergen-Belsen and Auschwitz survivor mother. His father lost his wife and children and spent the war hiding outside of Lask. The family joined relatives in Petaluma in 1951 when Irv was 5. Irv is now an attorney in Petaluma.**

**Irv:** It's always easy to follow the leader without examining where he's taking you. A lot of kids in this society, in the United States, don't critically examine things. They think what's important are the things you see on T.V., the things everybody else is doing. And certainly a part of that is growing up. But it's dangerous to carry that too far and not look inside yourself and to be suspicious of someone who's going to make things easy. Things are not simple and things are not easy.

**Mei and Shiro Nakano: Mei was born in Colorado and Shiro was born in Los Angeles. Mei and Shiro were interned at Amache Camp in Colorado during the war, and they were married there. Shiro later served in World War II in Army Intelligence. Mei left the camp in early 1945. They now live in Sebastopol where they are both involved in publishing and Mei in writing.**



**Mei:** My father thought the kids born here should follow the American way of life. And even then he felt they would run up against prejudice. He used to say, "Don't forget you are Japanese!" meaning you must not bring shame to the whole race. It meant you were somebody. It sustained us through a lot of humiliation we underwent.

It's disgusting the way people forget where they come from. The only difference between them and the boat people is that they came before the others did. It's easy to say-because someone else is a different color or looks a little different-"You don't belong here, this belongs to us." What do you mean, it belongs to you, just because you were here ten or fifty years before? So what?

**Shiro:** I was working in a market for a man who had even sponsored a Japanese American scout troop. We felt comfortable. On December 7<sup>th</sup>, the liquor manager came running up to me and said, "You and I are enemies." I hadn't even heard of Pearl Harbor! On Monday, (the owner) was there with a termination check saying, "I have to let you go, because we're not on the same side anymore." He did not stop to think that I was an American citizen, born and raised in Los Angeles.

**Mei:** The direction of our whole lives is towards civil rights. We vote that way and we talk that way. And we're really very sad when people who have undergone the same kinds of experiences that we have can turn around and forget what it cost us!

**Shiro:** Education is the only answer. It's the only way we are going to create a sense of security. Prejudice is so insidious. Without education we just fall right back into the same old trap...children are very aware of outward things. But you shouldn't be afraid of things you haven't come up against before. If you try not to make fun of a person who looks a little strange or different, pretty soon you don't have to try. It becomes a habit.