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Through life's events, big and small, Atomettes always there for each other

By Los Angeles Times, adapted by Newsela staff
11.03.14



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Just Us Girls (JUGS), a Nisei young women's club that formed at a Japanese-American internment camp in Manzanar, California, stayed together after World War II. In fact, surviving members still meet to this day. This photo was taken in Boyle Heights in Los Angeles circa 1946. Photo: Sumi Hughes/UCLA Newsroom

The ladies sat in Rose Honda's home in West Los Angeles with faded artifacts of their past lives laid out on the dining table.

There are photos of outings, saddle shoes and white gloves. There is a United Airlines ticket from Los Angeles to Catalina Island from 1951 and an invitation on stationery with elaborate writing that describes a Christmas dinner with ham and candied yams.

The women eat together and reminisce about the times they had together.

The Atomettes are meeting again, just like they have for the last 65 years.

"We Talk And Talk And Talk"

In 1949, seven young Japanese-American women formed a social club to seek refuge from exclusion and racism. The group has endured and the friends have bonded through life's events, both big and small.

The women have different personalities. Taye Inadomi is the brainy one. Susan Uemura, happy and generous. Sadie Hifumi, the talented writer and leader. Kathi Yamazaki, the creative only child. Frances Yonemori, the funny one. Karlene Koketsu, the artist. Michi Yamaji, who was quiet but lighthearted, died several years ago.

"When we get together, it's always like yesterday," said Honda, 87, who has been a leader in the group from the beginning. "We talk and talk and talk and don't want to say goodbye."

After World War II, social groups like the Atomettes spread rapidly throughout Southern California. More than 200 clubs were formed by second-generation Japanese-Americans, known as Nisei. The clubs provided a safe space for Japanese-Americans during a time of social hardships. Harsh discrimination pushed many individuals out of mainstream organizations.

According to Valerie Matsumoto, a UCLA Asian American studies professor, the clubs provided a valuable social niche for members. The groups shielded youth from prejudice and exclusion. They offered a "place of belonging and camaraderie."

Nisei Social Groups

Before the war, there were far more clubs in existence. But after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941, the federal government forced Japanese-Americans to leave their jobs and homes on the West Coast to stay in internment camps. They were forced to live in the camps, which were often in rural areas with armed guards and barbed wire.

The Atomettes formed a few years after the war, around the time that community leaders started promoting youth groups as a way to address rising delinquency rates in the Nisei who were returning from the camps.

Religious organizations sponsored many of the clubs. The Atomettes were formed out of the West Los Angeles United Methodist Church by Honda and Mary Ishizuka, then Sunday school teachers.

Despite this rich history, today attendance and interest in clubs hovers low. Amid the huge amount of other social and athletic opportunities for kids and teenagers, the clubs have a hard time recruiting and maintaining new members.

This decline is typical in most immigrant groups, where often successive generations weaken their ethnic-specific ties during the assimilation process. Most of the Atomettes' children haven't married other Japanese-Americans, attended Japanese-language school or supported community institutions.

"I'm glad that my children are comfortable with who they are, interacting with people of different ethnicities," Hifumi said. "But at the same time, I'm a little sad that they and their children are losing the qualities that make them unique as Japanese-Americans."

Birthdays, Weddings, Baby Showers

Times have changed since the Atomettes first began, over 65 years ago. In the late 1940s, Harry S. Truman was president. The anti-Communist Red Scare drove Hollywood to blacklist celebrities. Japanese immigrants in California were prohibited from owning land or marrying whites.

And the United States had launched the Atomic Age — which inspired the club name as a reflection of the girls' "energy and explosiveness," Honda said.

Racism was still rampant across West Los Angeles. As they were growing up, the women were victimized by prejudices. They recall having rocks thrown through their home windows, having white classmates call them "Japs" and being spat on.

Within the Japanese-American church community, the girls found comfort and safety. They had access to all-American experiences that their immigrant parents, overwhelmed with social and financial pressures, could not easily provide.

They visited an amusement park in Southern California, sampled traditional American foods, toured museums and gardens and took a train to see some of the state's impressive monuments.

As they grew up and graduated from college, their meetings morphed into social gatherings, centered on birthdays, weddings and baby shows. A highlight for the group was Honda's 1989 surprise retirement party, where the women gave her a handmade quilt featuring patterns symbolizing her life's accomplishments.

Through Tough Times Too

The friends have been there for each other through tough times too. When one woman suffered a brain injury, the group was there with prayers and plants. During surgeries, the women delivered rice cakes, teriyaki chicken and other favorite foods. Now that they are getting older, they have gathered for funerals.

They have avoided girl-group drama and maintained incredibly close friendships all of these years. Some believe that Japanese cultural values of cohesion and group harmony have kept them together. Others think the women have simply clicked from the beginning.

"It's a sisterhood," Inadomi said. "When we get back together, it's like we're young again."

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