

Kimiko Fujii Kitayama

*Written by HAHS Staff*

Kimiko “Kimi” Fujii was born in Hayward in February of 1922. She was the fourth of six children. Her parents were both immigrants from Japan. Kimi’s father, Ryutaro Fujii, moved to the U.S. in 1902 on a student visa. He quickly moved to San Jose and worked on the orchards of the Winchester House (the Winchester Mystery House today). He then moved to Oakland in 1906 and opened a small nursery. In 1912, Kimi’s mother, Katsu Yokobori, arrived in the U.S. and the couple soon married.

By 1920, the Fujii’s moved to Hayward where Kimi was born a few years later. The family operated a nursery at the corner of Orchard Avenue and Soto Road despite several obstacles. Immigrants of Asian background were prevented from buying land under California’s 1913 “Alien Land Law”. However, corporations were able to purchase property and Asians were not prevented from forming corporations. Thanks to the efforts of a sympathetic lawyer, Fujii Company Incorporated was formed with family members as the shareholders of the corporation.

Further complicating matters, in 1922, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld *Ozawa v. US*, a decision that prevented immigrants from Japan from becoming naturalized citizens. This wouldn’t change until well after World War II. The Fujii’s family corporation was a way to work around these federal and state-wide legal obstacles. In addition, the family faced increasing anti-Asian sentiment that had taken hold in California at the turn of the century.

The Fujii family specialized in growing cut flowers in greenhouses. Carnations, gladiolas, delphiniums, and asters were just some of the varieties grown by the family and sold wholesale at the San Francisco Flower Market.



*The Fujii Family c. 1938. Kimi is standing to the right of her father, wearing a plaid jacket.*

Growing up, Kimi and her siblings attended John Muir Grammar School, just across the road from their family's nursery. In a later oral history interview, she recalled enjoying her time in grammar school, playing "snap the whip" with friends, and walking home to have lunch with her mother. Later she attended Bret Harte Middle School and then Hayward Union High School.

It was in high school that Kimi experienced some prejudice directed toward her Japanese ancestry and culture. She recalled not being invited to parties and left out of functions with no explanation. Kimi also recalled teachers expecting Japanese students to work harder and to excel, forcing upon them what we now see as the "model minority" stereotype today. Because Hayward Union High was the only high school in the area, Kimi was able to meet more Japanese American students than she had in grammar and middle school. A large number of Japanese American students living in Mt. Eden attended school with Kimi and she was able to connect with many of them. Years later, Kimi recalled with some disappointment that many of the Japanese American students made a point of pretending not to speak or understand the Japanese language at school, perhaps in an attempt to fit in better with their mostly white peers.



*Kimi is pictured here twice, in the 1940 Hayward Union High School yearbook, as part of the Program Committee (upper right), and the Executive Council (bottom photo).*

After high school, Kimi began attending U.C. Berkeley. During her freshman year however, everything changed. In May 1942, five months after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Kimi and her family were forcibly removed to Tanforan Racetrack in San Bruno, California. The Fujii family was amongst 120 Japanese American households taken from the Hayward area. In September 1942, the Fujii family, along with the others at Tanforan, were removed to Topaz Internment Center in Utah. Most would be incarcerated until the end of World War II. Kimi's parents were able to contact a lawyer and make arrangements to lease their nursery, but there were many unknowns.

While incarcerated, Kimi did her best to maintain a sense of normalcy as the leader of a youth group. The experience of incarceration did take its toll on the Fujii family. Kimi recalled later that "the family unit had been very strong until [Topaz]. It broke down a little bit in camps because the younger kids were running around and being very independent. So the family unit that we always considered very strong, slowly disintegrated."

Like many college age students, Kimi was soon able to leave Topaz and began taking college courses at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. She was able to do so with the help of the American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker organization that helped Japanese Americans leave the internment camps to attend college in other parts of the country. In 1944, Kimi left Provo and transferred to the University of Wisconsin. By 1947, Kimi received a degree in Botany. All the while, she worked odd jobs to pay for her education and housing. Her older brother, Kenji, also sent Kimi what money he could to help her and his other sisters with expenses.

After graduation, Kimi returned to Hayward and immediately moved back home to help her family restart the nursery. While she was still in Wisconsin, other family members had returned home to Hayward at the end of the war. On their return, however, they had had to live in the workmen's quarters for six months, waiting for white renters to move out of their home. During that time, Kimi's youngest sister was attacked by a sailor in San Francisco who targeted her for being Japanese American. The experience frightened the family and reminded them of the prejudice they still faced even after the war had ended.



*The Fujii Nursery as it appeared later, c.1976. The Nursery remained at Orchard Road and Soto Street until closing in 1992. There is a small housing development at the location today.*

Inspired by her experiences to help other returning Japanese American families, Kimi became very active in the local community. She joined the local chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL). She also became a member of the local Council for Civic Unity. The Council was essential in helping Japanese Americans and other people of color figure out how to rent or buy homes in Hayward at a time when real estate agents and landlords consistently steered them to properties outside of “white” neighborhoods. Between 1964 and 1973, she also was a member of the City of Hayward’s Human Relation’s Commission. During her tenure, the committee issued a report on persistent housing discrimination against African Americans that functioned to steer many families to the Kelly Hill area, which was just outside the city’s boundaries. Kimi was named Hayward’s “Distinguished Citizen” of 1972 for her efforts.

Kimi was also active in California’s Democratic State Committee. She helped to organize and fundraise for many local candidates. She also served as a delegate at the 1964 Democratic National Convention. In 1972, she held her first political office, as a member of the Alameda County Transit District Board. Kimi was appointed to the board after another member passed away suddenly. Later, she was elected to the post for two additional terms. Kimi was the first woman to serve on the board.



*A portrait of Kimi Fujii, c. 1975*

In 1977, Kimi married Ray Kitayama and relocated with her husband to Brighton, Colorado to operate another nursery. Ray's family also owned a nursery in Union City. Ray and Kimi had known each other growing up and attended school together. After a few years, the couple moved to Homestead, Florida and opened yet another nursery. Eleven years later, in 1991, Kimi and Ray moved back to Union City, so that they could be closer to family and retire in the area where they had spent most of their lives.

In December 2009, U.C. Berkeley presented Kimi and 40 of her peers with honorary degrees. All of the students were Japanese Americans that had been unable to continue their education after being incarcerated by the U.S. Government. The degree was just one of many honors that she earned over the course of her long life. Kimiko Fujii Kitayama passed away in Union City in March of 2019, leaving a legacy of kindness, commitment and service to her community.