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Two OSU students play key roll in honorary degree bill

HB 2823, passed by the Oregon House on April 2, would give honorary degrees to Japanese Americans interned during WWII

By: Nick Vardanega

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When Andy Kiyuna, an OSU student in ethnic studies, began lobbying for the university to give honorary degrees to Americans of Japanese ancestry who were forced out of college and into internment camps during World War II, he had no idea his efforts would eventually lead to an Oregon House bill that would do just that.

On April 2, the Oregon House unanimously passed HB 2823, allowing degrees to be granted to Japanese Americans who were previously unable to complete their college educations when President Franklin D. Roosevelt authorized Executive Order 9066, which ordered people of Japanese ancestry on the West Coast to be interned in camps.

The bill states that their next-of-kin may also claim the honorary degrees.

"I honestly never saw it going this far," Kiyuna said. "I thought I'd tackle OSU and maybe somebody would pick it up on another campus somewhere."

Kiyuna admits he feels somewhat embarrassed about all the attention he has received as a result of the bill.

"It wasn't really my idea - the idea's been around for some time," he said. "I don't quite see myself as the starter for all of this. A lot of people have been helping the entire way."

The idea was first brought to Kiyuna's attention last year by Sandy Tsuneyoshi, coordinator of Asian-Pacific American education in the minority education office.

"It just really stuck in my head and was something that I wanted to do," Kiyuna said. Kiyuna is half Japanese, but none of his relatives were interned during World War II. His grandparents lived in Hawaii, where Japanese Americans were not interned, as they constituted such a large percentage of the population.

Kiyuna says he was motivated to take up the cause while he was president of the Japanese American Student Association and was screening documentaries about the internment camps for a day of remembrance.

"Seeing all these people talking about their experiences there - those were the hardest videos I'd ever had to watch in my life," Kiyuna said.

Kiyuna was encouraged by his friend Joel Fischer, who was a senior in political science at the time, to enroll in an ASOSU internship called Ethics of Diversity, in which Fischer said they were supposed to find an instance of racism or sexism in the community and "break down that '-ism' barrier."

Kiyuna ended up not pursuing the idea of honorary degrees for the class, but instead decided to pursue it on his own, lobbying ASOSU last spring for nine weeks in an attempt to get the OSU administration to take up the proposal.

"Ultimately, with competition vying for attention, it never came to fruition," Fischer said of Kiyuna's efforts.

"I had extensive conversations with Andy about it and realized it was important to him and that it was important for all Oregonians."

At the beginning of this year's legislative session in January, Fischer - who is now a legislative aid - brought the proposal to Rep. Tina Kotek from North/Northeast Portland. Kotek's district is home to the Expo Center, which is where the Japanese Americans in Oregon were held before being sent to internment camps throughout the western United States.

Kotek and Rep. Brian Clem from Salem agreed to co-sponsor the bill.

"It is a small gesture to redress the harm caused by an unjust part of our past. It will not correct past mistakes, but I hope it will restore some amount of dignity and pride," Kotek wrote in an e-mail.

Clem, whose late father-in-law was interned and would be eligible for the bill, said this bill is a chance to give people something that was wrongfully taken away from them and that the kind of racism responsible for the internment of people of Japanese ancestry still exists in the United States today.

"We have an ongoing discussion in this country whenever there's a big crisis about people of other races and colors and whether or not they're part of the enemy," Clem said, citing the example of a student who was taken out of a college following 9/11 and later found to be innocent.

The bill is expected to pass the Senate as well, though the exact date for its appearance at the Senate floor has yet to be decided. When it goes to Senate, Kiyuna says that might testify on its behalf.

"I didn't do the greatest in public speaking," Kiyuna laughed nervously. "So, lots of practice before then."

It's unclear exactly how many people will be eligible to receive honorary degrees if the bill does become law. Approximately 120,000 Japanese Americans were interned under Executive Order 9066, 3,500 of which were from Oregon.

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