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Japanese Americans' degrees win OK

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SALEM -- Japanese Americans, denied Oregon college degrees during World War II, could get honorary degrees under a bill that passed Monday in the Oregon House.

Floor speeches for the bill were few and to the point.

The vote was unanimous.

"This bill is a small gesture to redress the harm caused by an unjust part of our past," said co-sponsor Rep. Tina Kotek, D-Portland. "It will not correct past mistakes, but I hope it will restore some amount of dignity and pride."

House Bill 2823 would apply to students enrolled in an Oregon college or university when they were forced into internment camps by presidential executive order in 1942.

Kotek rattled off the figures: Anywhere from 110,000 to 120,000 Japanese American men, women, children -- 70,000 of them U.S. citizens -- were shipped off to remote camps. More than 3,500 were from Oregon, and most of them were born in the United States.

It's uncertain how many of the former students are still alive and eligible for a degree, but time is running out, said another co-sponsor, Rep. Brian Clem, D-Salem.

"This may be the very last opportunity," he said, "to right a wrong to the living."

In addition, the bill allows families to request degrees on behalf of deceased relatives.

The Oregon university system supports the bill, which now heads to the Senate. -- Janie Har

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