

Upholding the Rights of Citizens

Despite internment and discrimination, UMLaw's first Asian-American graduate has spent a lifetime fighting for civil rights. Meet distinguished graduate Frank F. Chuman.

BY CYNTHIA DI PASQUALE

It was 1944, and war was on the minds of University of Maryland law students as they conversed in a school lounge.

A new transfer to the Baltimore campus, at the corner of Greene and Redwood Streets, Frank F. Chuman regularly joined discussions with his new classmates—some women and some wounded war veterans—about Japanese Americans and President Franklin D. Roosevelt's order confining nearly 120,000 of them to internment camps on the West Coast. Ten such camps were set up to

house Japanese-American evacuees forced from their homes following the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

Although this was ordinary talk of the day, Chuman was an unlikely participant in such conversations.

"I was kind of a freak," he jokes, recalling how he was the first Japanese-American many of his classmates had ever seen. He had actually spent time in an internment camp, finally making his way to Baltimore—he went on to become the law school's first Asian-American graduate.

"The students were, of course, curious about me," he says. "They were very sympathetic and interested and ignorant about this evacuation,

so they used to listen to me with a great deal of interest."

Since earning his degree in 1945, the 89-year-old lawyer has remained a pioneer for Japanese Americans, committed to proving the vast majority were loyal citizens during World War II.

He attributes much of his success to the university, and says he still feels a "connection" to it, even though now it's in a different location, "and of course is much grander, with a great faculty and great library and an interesting mix of students."

Chuman was pulled out of his second year in a part-time law school program at USC in 1942 after being tapped to run a 250-bed hospital at the Manzanar War Relocation Center in California.

After a year in the camps, he got a special release to continue his education at the University of Toledo. He studied there for one year, but after taking a summer course in admiralty at the University of Maryland, he decided he liked the school so much

he'd stay for his final year. "I'd never been to the East Coast before," Chuman recalls. "It was just an entirely new environment."

Chuman says he experienced little racial backlash in Baltimore, despite the ongoing war. In fact, a fellow law student from the Merchant Marines invited him to rent a room in his group house. Most of his fellow renters worked in the defense industry—in shipyards or for the Glenn L. Martin aircraft company. The occasional slur, such as one used against him by an irritable housemate, would stir up the past.

"At that instant, I recalled all of the hostility and bad feelings and everything that happened against the Japanese and Japanese Americans," he says. "I was waiting to be a target like this."

Although Chuman had several offers in the area after graduation, he felt an obligation to return to California to care for his parents, then leaving the camps. So, one day after being sworn into the Maryland bar, he headed back to the West Coast, where he's lived ever since. What he learned at the law school, however, he's used to advocate for Japanese Americans for decades. Most significantly, he remembers learning about the *writ of error coram nobis* from an equity class taught by Dean Howell.

In the early eighties, he and a team of twenty-five mostly young, third-generation Japanese-American lawyers successfully used that writ to petition the courts to vacate the convictions of Fred T. Korematsu, Minoru Yasui, and Gordon K. Hirabayashi for violating wartime curfews and relocation orders. Each had been previously upheld by the Supreme Court.

Chuman's legal career took him to the A.L. Wirin firm in Los Angeles, which represented the Japanese American Citizens League and thousands of individuals battling the government on deportation or citizenship matters. He still plies the law today.

He also wrote the seminal legal work *The Bamboo People: The Law and Japanese-Americans*, published in 1971 and updated five years later.

Chuman made his first trip back to the university since graduating more than sixty years ago in the fall of 2005, and was presented with the Distinguished Alumni award.

"He was a pivotal player in the United States' ability to learn about what went wrong and how to fix it," law school Dean Karen H. Rothenberg said. "It's important to the law school that we could celebrate his legacy and he could serve as a wonderful role model to our Asian-American students, and to all of our students."

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