"This just seemed so appropriate for our students – they should know what their heritage is."

Kathy Myers
Teacher, Del Oro High School

Del Oro High School student Lynn Silva, left, listens to "Within the Silence," a presentation dramatizing the World War II internment of Japanese Americans, along with her grandmother, Clara Hada, and her mother, Donna Silva. Kim Ina, below, plays the role of a little girl living in Seattle's Japanese town during the war. The performance is a production of Living Voices, a Seattle-based organization that puts together dramatic presentations about historical events.

HISTORY LESSON

Students draw parallel between past, present

"Those who ignore history are destined to repeat it."
– George Santayana

By Laurel Rosen
Sacramento Bee staff writer

If, as the saying implies, paying attention to history will keep it from being repeated, Kim Ina is doing her part to make sure young people move into the future with a clear vision of America's mistakes of the past.

As bombs pounded Baghdad last week, Ina gave a series of presentations at Del Oro and Placer high schools dramatizing the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II.

It didn't take long for students in the audience to draw parallels between the suspicion and bigotry faced by Japanese Americans after Pearl Harbor was bombed in 1941 and the same problems faced by many Arabs and Muslims in post-Sept. 11 America. But teachers noted that they requested the performance because of the history of the Japanese community in Loomis, not its reaction to current events.

Ina's performance, called "Within the Silence," plays the part of Emiko Yamada, a little girl living in Seattle's Japanese town during World War II. The one-woman play tells the story of Emiko's family as they are forced to close their business and sell their possessions and then are separated and sent to internment camps.

After three years in dusty camps surrounded by barbed wire, the family was free to return home. But they did so with one less family member, because Emiko's brother had died in combat as a member of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team.

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Team, a Japanese American unit.

When Ina took questions from the audience after the performance, a teenage boy raised his hand and asked, "What do you think about racial profiling?"

Ina turned the question back to the students, and a debate ensued.

"It's hard," said one girl, "because sometimes people of a certain racial group might be more likely to be targets.

Another girl added her feelings: "If I see someone with a ban, I think it's offensive because if they wanted to be an American, they'd try their hardest to look like Americans."

But one of her classmates disagreed: "People come here because we're a free country. So if we judge people because they wear a turban, then we're not really being Americans."

Ina said that in the two years she has performed "Within the Silence" at schools around the nation, students always react by drawing comparisons with today's social and political climate.

But the Loomis audience was unusual, Ina said, because of the history of its Japanese community.

"There's a real awareness here of what happened (during World War II)," she said.

That awareness probably comes from growing up with people like Stuart Kageta, a Del Oro math teacher. Kageta's grandparents moved from Japan to Loomis early last century. He said they settled in Loomis because it was known to be receptive to ChristianJapanese Buddhist Japanese moving to Placer County usually settled in Pennyr.

For many years, Kageta said, Japanese were the largest ethnic minority in the Loomis area.

During World War II, Kageta's parents and grandparents were sent to internment camps, and his father served with the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. When the war ended, his father's family settled in Fair Oaks, and his mother's family moved back to Loomis.

The experiences of the Kageta family and many others like them form an integral piece of the history of the Loomis basin, said Kathy Myers, a fellow teacher at Del Oro.

"The performance strikes at the heart of this community, she said. "This just seemed so appropriate for our students – they should know what their heritage is."

Myers saw "Within the Silence" during a teacher training session at the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles. She said she and other teachers from Del Oro and Placer high schools found the performance so powerful that they wanted to bring it to their students. Through a special grant for arts programming, they were able to bring Ina to Placer County.

"The performance is a production of Living Voices, a Seattle-based organization that puts together dramatic presentations about historical events."