

# community spotlight

## community-based writing programs

*Writing the JA experience is not something reserved just for professional writers. Here are two community-based programs that encourage Nikkei of all ages—from 7 to 77 (and more!)—to explore questions of identity and life experience through writing.*

### CALIFORNIA WRITING PROJECT

#### Genevieve Didion K-8 School

Sacramento, CA

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*For information about the CWP, a state-wide professional development program based at the University of California at Berkeley:*

Website: [www.californiawritingproject.org](http://www.californiawritingproject.org)

Tel: (510) 642-7877

Students at Sacramento's Genevieve Didion K-8 School are learning and writing stories of the JA experience with the people they know best, their parents and grandparents. Through a project adapted from the California Writing Project (CWP), the diverse students of three first grade and two fourth grade classrooms interview their parents or grandparents and then write and illustrate the stories of growing up in California. This is the second successful year of the project, funded in part by teacher grants from the California Council for the Humanities (2005) and donations from parents and the Didion School Improvement Program (2006).

The project culminates in a multimedia exhibit, including storyboards centered around a framed photo of the child and the person who was interviewed. "It's almost museum-like," says first grade teacher Aileen Nishio, also a Teacher-Consultant for the Area 3 Writing Project. The project allows first graders "to go beyond themselves," she says.

Nishio recalls having to question one first grader who interviewed his Nikkei grandmother about the meaning of "barbed wire" and "barracks." And last year her six-year-old student, Akemi Alden, even had her adoption story featured in an article in the *Sacramento Bee*. The outcome of this project, she says, is "opening a door."

And the project not only benefits the kids' writing. It brings each child and the person they interviewed together for a photo session. Grandparents especially, she says, are happy to be in the school setting and find connections among other grandparents. "I don't know if you can measure the value of so much pride among the children and their grandparents," says Nishio.

*(Left) 2005 open house in the school gymnasium. (Right) Aileen Nishio and her student, Kenji Lo, who interviewed his grandfather Stan Umeda.*



Photos courtesy of Aileen Nishio





Members of the Senior Women's Writing Group, hard at work.

Remembering, writing and sharing their lives have been a long-term process for the Japanese-American elders meeting weekly in the JCCCNC's Senior Women's Writing Group. Established in the late 1990s, the workshop, originally facilitated by Judy Kajiwara, began as a safe place for Nikkei seniors to explore their past and write their own stories. Now joined by a core of Chinese American women as well, it has become perhaps the longest ongoing writing group for Asian American senior women in the state. "They have been through a lot together as a group," says Jill Shiraki, former Director of Programs at the JCCCNC.

It was from this group that the well-known anthology of internment experiences, *From Our Side of the Fence*, emerged. The editor of the volume, Poet Brian Komei Dempster, explains how some of the women from the Senior Women's Writing Group he was leading in 1999 approached him to get help: "My students wanted to break through silences through writing but had not yet found a vehicle to do so." With a grant from the California Civil Liberties Public Education Program, the internment stories of eleven student writers, including nine women and two men, along with Dempster's lesson plans were published in *From Our Side of the Fence* (Kearny Street Workshop, San Francisco) in 2001. It's one of the first books of its kind written to serve as both an educational guide for youth and older Nikkei who might want to start workshops of their own. The workshop, which is presently facilitated by Shizue Seigel, continues to this day, meeting every Monday morning. Members create personal memoirs, journal, and write poems, essays, and letters, which they share with the group. But it's more than that. Says Shiraki, "Through writing and sharing of their lives, their humor, (and, or course) their snacks, they have become a women's support group as well as a writer's group. They continue to meet in spite of many transitions."



Facilitator Shizue Seigel (seated center) with members of the Senior Women's Writing Group.

## SENIOR WOMEN'S WRITING GROUP

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