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For Immediate Release

October 7, 2010

Compton Community College District to Host Honorary Degree Ceremony for Former Japanese American Students October 16

The Compton Community College District (CCCD) will confer honorary degrees on October 16 to Japanese American students of the former Compton Junior college whose education was interrupted by internment during World War II.

The festivities will begin with a reception in the Student Lounge and a viewing of a library exhibit titled "The Nisei Student Experience at Compton Junior College" at 1:30 p.m., followed by the graduation ceremony at 3:30 p.m. Assembly Member Warren Furutani (D-Long Beach) is the keynote speaker for the event, which will take at the Compton Community College District located at 1111 E. Artesia Blvd., Compton, CA 90221.

More than 76 Nisei honorees have been identified as qualifying for honorary degrees; many of them and/or their family members (as representatives in absentia) will be in attendance October 16.

The special ceremony is part of the California Nisei College Diploma Project, supported by Assemblyman Furutani, and others. The aim of the project is to award honorary degrees to Japanese American students whose studies were forcibly suspended in 1942 when they were ordered into internment camps as a result of Executive Order 9066.

The California Nisei College Diploma Project is the implementation of Assembly Bill 37, a bill introduced by Assemblyman Furutani, passed by the Legislature and signed into law by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger. The California Community College, California State University and University of California systems are all participating in this project. Since this historic legislation was signed into law, hundreds of Japanese Americans have received honorary degrees, some posthumously, from colleges and universities throughout California.

The following are brief bios highlighting a few of the honorees:

Tomomi "Tom" Murakami

Tomomi Murakami was a few weeks shy of earning his associate degree at Compton Junior College in April 1942 when he and his family were initially moved to an assembly center at Santa Anita Park, before being relocated to the Jerome internment camp in Rohrer, Arkansas. As a result, his acceptance to the University of Wisconsin was rescinded. He was able to eventually attend Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, where he graduated in 1944 with a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering. He then earned his master's degree in 1947 and a Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania. Murakami enjoyed a long and distinguished

engineering career at RCA, where he earned 11 patents for his work and helped develop the radar design for the AEGIS missile, which is still in use today.

Miwako “Monica” (Oana) Miya

Born in 1921 in San Francisco and raised in San Pedro, Calif., Miwako Oana Miya started her journalism education at Compton Junior College. In 1942, her studies were interrupted when she and her family were forced to move to the Heart Mountain Relocation Center in Wyoming. While there, she wrote a column about internment camp life titled “Mo’s Scratchpad” for the Heart Mountain Sentinel, the relocation center’s newspaper. After being released from Heart Mountain, Miya moved to New York City. Her career highlights include positions at Columbia’s American Press Institute and the Metropolitan Museum of Art before serving as Associate Dean of Student Affairs at Columbia University’s School of Journalism at the time of her retirement in 1993. Miya passed away in 2009 at the age of 88.

Lawson Sakai

Lawson Sakai attended Compton Junior College until his family was forced to relocate in April 1942. With the support of their church, however, the Sakai family was able to move from Montebello, Calif., with only a day’s notice to Colorado and avoided going to an internment camp. Sakai briefly attended Mesa College in Grand Junction, but left school to enlist in the U.S. military. Initially denied due to “Enemy Alien” status, he volunteered to join the 442nd Regimental Combat Team where he served in Mississippi and later France. Wounded four times in combat, he was awarded both a Purple Heart and two Bronze Star Medals. After the war, Sakai resettled in California and enrolled at Pepperdine University. His studies were interrupted for a third time when his father-in-law requested help restarting a farming business in Gilroy, Calif. Sakai worked for several other companies before founding his own travel agency in 1970, which he sold in 1990. He is currently the president of the Friends & Family of Nisei Veterans (FFNV) organization in Morgan Hill, Calif.

Yoji Ozaki and Lily Ozaki Teraji

Siblings Yoji Ozaki and Lily Ozaki Teraji both attended Compton Junior College until their family was sent to the assembly center at Santa Anita Park in the spring of 1942. Ozaki was asked to volunteer to help build the Manzanar internment camp with the promise of his family being kept together. Six months later, Ozaki was reunited with his family when they were all moved to Jerome Internment Camp in Arkansas. After their release, his sister Teraji moved to Chicago where she found work as a nanny and later, as a secretary. Ozaki was recruited into the 442nd Regimental Combat Team composed completely of Japanese Americans. He served in both Italy and France. After the war, he joined his sister in Chicago, where he earned a degree in psychology from Roosevelt University. Ozaki worked as a social worker aiding immigrants from many different countries. He passed away in 2007.

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About the Compton Community College District

The Compton Community College District serves the communities of Carson, Compton, Enterprise, North Long Beach, Lynwood, Paramount and Willowbrook. The District is governed by a state-appointed Special Trustee, who works with the five-member elected Board of Trustees. Board meetings are held the third Tuesday of each month and are open to the public. The District is located at 1111 E. Artesia Boulevard, Compton, CA, 90221.