



NEWS

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Former Compton Junior College Japanese American Student Awarded Honorary Degree —Seven Decades Later

Tomomi (Tom) Murakami has a Ph.D. in electrical engineering, holds 11 patents and enjoyed a long and distinguished career at RCA. But there is one honor that has eluded him for nearly 70 years, his associate degree from the former Compton Junior College.

On Oct. 16, it will finally, and rightfully, be his. Murakami is one of more than 60 former students from the former Compton Junior College who will receive an honorary degree during a special ceremony as part of the California Nisei College Diploma Project.

It's a statewide effort to provide honorary degrees to Japanese Americans whose studies were forcibly suspended in 1942 when they were ordered into internment camps during World War II. The California Community Colleges, California State University and University of California are all participating in this project.

"The education that I received at Compton served as the basis for my future education at Swarthmore College and the University of Pennsylvania," says Murakami, who is retired and living in New Jersey. "Without this education, I could not have achieved the success that I had in later life. This honor brings some closure to my experience at Compton Junior College that was interrupted in May of 1942."

It is estimated that more than 2,500 Japanese American students were affected by Executive Order 9066 during World War II, including more than 1,200 students attending community colleges. More than 100 Compton Junior College students, including Murakami, were forced to leave school for the internment camps. Many of those interned were American-born citizens who were Nisei, which means second generation Japanese Americans.

Murakami's high school was an extension of Compton Junior College and was located on the same campus. He completed his high school classes by the middle of his senior year, and was able to transition into college classes, where he earned all As, except for one B in economics, he remembered. He was on track to graduate from the 14th grade in June 1942 and was accepted to the University of Wisconsin.

But in May of that year, mere weeks before graduation, he was forced to move with his family to an Assembly Center at Santa Anita Park. Three months later, he was sent to an internment camp in Rohrer, Arkansas. To make matters worse, while there, he received a letter from the

University of Wisconsin notifying him that his acceptance had been rescinded because of his Japanese ancestry.

While in Arkansas, Murakami was able to gain hands-on experience in surveying, which was a subject he had been studying at Compton Junior College. He was able to participate in surveying work in the bayous outside the camp, under the supervision of soldiers, he recalled.

Three months later, Murakami was permitted to leave to attend Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania. All of his credits from Compton Junior College were accepted, enabling him to enroll as a junior. At that time, he noted, a year's tuition was about \$400. He and his father had enough savings to pay for tuition. But to earn money for books and miscellaneous expenses, he got up early every morning to sweep out the Swarthmore library, Murakami said.

He graduated in 1944 with a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering. He went on to earn his master's degree in 1947 and a Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania in 1970.

As a Japanese American, though, finding a job in 1944 proved to be a challenge, even though two of his brothers were serving in the U.S. military overseas.

Murakami accepted a fellowship from RCA to do research on a frequency drift problem the company was having with its FM receivers. As a result of his work, he submitted an application for his first patent. His approach later became a standard part of FM radio circuitry.

After his fellowship, Murakami was offered an engineering position at RCA working on stereo systems and the design of the first color television. It was during this time that he earned 11 patents. In 1960, Murakami relocated to the RCA facility in Moorestown, NJ, where he started working in the Missile and Surface Radar Division. His work centered on the radar design for the AEGIS missile defense system, which is still in use today.

Murakami retired from RCA in 1982 and he continued consulting with the company for another 10 years. He and his wife, Mary (who passed away on Aug. 14, 2010), have five children and one grandson and now reside in Medford, NJ.

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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.