

Mieko Nishi

October 1, 1935 ~ April 22, 2025

A LIFE WELL LIVED – MIEKO NISHI

Mieko Nishi passed away on April 22, 2025 in her Draper, Utah home following two separate hospitalizations for pneumonia and RSV. At the time of her passing, she was in in-home hospice under the care of her family and her Intermountain Healthcare hospice team. Those of us who knew and loved her are feeling this loss very deeply.

Mieko Iguchi was born on October 1, 1935 in Chula Vista, California - the daughter of a farmer and successful businessman Mike Kumataro Iguchi and former schoolteacher Mitsuko Nakai Iguchi. Mieko and her six siblings were raised on the family's farms at the southern end of San Diego County in Palm City and the Tijuana Valley. Although her parents started with little, they worked hard and provided well for their children. Her father raised celery, tomatoes, cucumbers, beans, and many other vegetables. In addition, he owned a large packing shed where produce was washed and prepared for shipping. A freight train would stop at the platform and produce would be loaded up - which would then be delivered to major eastern cities. In addition to farming, Mieko's father started a downtown San Diego business called The San Diego Vegetable Exchange. Here, local grocers would come to buy produce to sell at their markets.

To anyone who would ask, Mieko always responded that she *loved* school. But in her first-grade year after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, she and her family were directed to board a train, not knowing where they were being taken. They were dropped off at the Santa Anita Racetrack in Arcadia, California. Here, they were kept for many months, living in horse stalls. While thousands of Japanese American families from the Pacific Coast were kept in detention centers like this, internment camps were being readied for them in remote locations in mostly western states.

Mieko's mother knew the family would eventually be relocated, but no one knew where – or at least they weren't saying. In preparation for the unknown, she ordered snow boots and heavy coats for each of the children from a catalog, and just their luck – they were to be sent to Poston, Arizona where temperatures ranged from 115 degrees to below freezing; and sandstorms, a constant threat, brought sand through the shrunken redwood slats into their makeshift home.

The Iguchis were assigned barrack 12, units C and D on Block 329. Life here was so, so difficult - the barracks had no running water, meals were taken in huge mess halls, restrooms and showers were a long walk away in shared buildings, and the hundreds and hundreds of barracks were surrounded by watchtowers with armed guards and barbed wire.

Months before, Mieko's father had been removed from their San Diego farm and separated from the family by government officials. He'd been kept with other high profile Japanese American men in New Mexico. He was later

reunited with the family in the Arizona desert. For three long years, Mieko's family was confined to the Poston internment camp with 17,000 other Japanese American men, women, and children. Her family were nine of the 120,000 west coast Japanese detained in ten internment camps during World War II.

Once they were allowed to return to San Diego, the Iguchis found they were more fortunate than many other Japanese-American families. Their Tijuana Valley and Palm City farms had been maintained in their absence by loyal neighbors. Mieko recalled that six or seven Japanese families who'd returned home to San Diego without a penny to their name, lived in the family's many outbuildings scattered across their three farms. Some stayed for years until they could get back on their feet. Once the Iguchis reclaimed possession of their farms, they worked hard to rebuild their 65 acres into a profitable business again.

Mieko was still a school-aged child after the World War II. She returned to Emory School where she attended fifth grade. She then moved on to Southwest Junior. Often after their school day, Mieko and her siblings would help on the farm. It seemed there was always work to be done. But there was time for fun, too. Mieko talked about May Pole dances and new dresses, community picnics, movies, and fountain sodas at the drug store. As a high schooler, Mieko and her sisters got jobs at a small market called Pic-a-Chic run by her older brother Charlie. The market sold produce, basic groceries, and meats. One of her jobs here was to sort the eggs by candling them. She enjoyed the perks she got from her brother in exchange for working at his store.

Mieko attended Chula Vista High where her favorite subject was English. She insisted that she was shy and never ditched class to go to the beach like "all the other kids." During her senior year, she transferred to the new Mar Vista High School as a member of its very first graduating class. She claimed she never missed a day of high school – and alleged that when she was younger, she even went to school with marks from chicken pox on her face.

After Mieko graduated from high school, she went to beauty school. She lived at home and took the Greyhound bus to classes at the Broadway Beauty School in downtown San Diego. it was a 9-month course followed by certification board exams.

Soon after, she moved to Los Angeles where she lived with a friend in a place that housed business college students. She worked as a babysitter in Beverly Hills and attended Los Angeles City College where she took business and secretarial classes. While at LACC, she took a job at Akron, a hardware store, doing secretarial work.

Later, Mieko and her sister Lily became roommates. They lived in an apartment on Orchard Street near the University of Southern California. Her first job as a beautician was at Teri's Beauty Shop in Los Angeles. She did shampoos, cuts, setting, styling, dying, and manicures. The owner was kind. Mieko remembers her boss bringing in Van de kamp's bran muffins to share. Teri's was a small beauty shop. It was just Teri and Mieko and a receptionist. The three became good friends.

At about this time, Mits Onizuka and Azuma Nishi were friends in Los Angeles. It's not clear who dated or was introduced to the other first, but Mieko and Ozzie got together as did Lily and Mits. Mieko was married to Ozzie in May of 1959 and Lily married to Mits a year later.

Ozzie and Mieko settled into their first home in Pasadena on Millard Street. Mieko did hair at The House of Luet on Lake Street and Ozzie was a postal clerk. Ozzie's mother, Grandma Nishi, lived in the adjoining home. It was like an old-fashioned bungalow-duplex. While living at the Millard Street house, Shannon, Miles, and Erin were born. During these years, the family attended services at the Japanese Union Presbyterian Church on Mary Street. Mieko drove Shannon to Pasadena Christian School and took Miles to Head Start then later to Lincoln Elementary. Those were the early days of summers at Grandma Iguchi's house, fun outings at the beach, and dusty truck rides to the ranch with Uncle Kenbo and cousins. A while later, a new Pasadena Freeway was proposed, and eminent domain was declared on the Millard neighborhood. This meant it was time for a move.

Ozzie and Mieko found and purchased a home in the CalTech neighborhood of Pasadena. They relocated to this home in 1968. Mieko loved volunteering in her kids' classrooms. She was often the children's room mother, bringing treats for parties and helping teachers. Mieko went to parent conferences and PTA meetings, she helped with paper drives and fundraisers. By this time, Parker and Darby were born and the Nishis became a family of seven.

Mieko enjoyed being Mom to her five kids – helping with schoolwork and projects, cooking delicious meals, throwing birthday parties, and overseeing practice sessions on piano, violin, and believe it or not, accordion. She was involved and devoted to her kids, logging hundreds and hundreds of hours in ice skating rinks, gyms, and ball fields across the valley, on tennis courts, in stadiums, and at performance venues. She supported her children in activities from Saturday Japanese school to scouting, to Suzuki violin recitals and everything in between. SO many miles were put onto that pistachio green Grand Torino station wagon – thousands and thousands of them! Even now, her children find it difficult to recall a time when she missed a competition, game, concert, recital, or school program. Later in life she gave this advice, “Be involved with your kids,” she said. “I think letting each of you kids try lots of different things was important. Each of you were so different in your interests.”

Once Darby started kindergarten, Mieko took a job offered her by Hamilton Elementary, the school across the street. She worked as a teacher’s aide for many years – grading papers and creating teaching materials. Years later, she transferred to Cleveland Elementary where she ran an IBM Writing to Read program and worked with reluctant learners. She enjoyed working in schools and the people she worked with.

In 2000, after Miles and Ozzie passed away, Mieko retired from the Pasadena Unified School District and relocated to Utah where she was eventually to became Grandma to young Aubrey, Roscoe, Tomio, and Yukio. During this period, she volunteered at Aubrey and Roscoe’s elementary school and ran the infamous “Grandma School” for her Utah grands every single summer. She loved hosting family dinners and working in her large yard, planting and tending to her vegetables and flowers. Neighbors would see her in the barely light morning hours as she would putter in her garden until it got too hot. Mieko enjoyed road trips to Las Vegas and California to visit family – especially her three California grandkids Cole, Tristan, and Noah. These visits made her very happy.

Mieko’s life was a life well lived. She was an extraordinarily strong and determined woman. She took pleasure in doing creative projects and being in the kitchen, and she didn’t mind hard work one bit. She was always up for a new adventure or a fun activity and enjoyed her travels. She had a soft spot for people experiencing hardship and loved being with family. Mieko is survived by her children Shannon (Bill) Moedl, Erin (Stephan) Sugiyama, Parker (Cindy) Nishi, and Darby (Jeff) Lipp, and her seven much-loved grandchildren Aubrey, Roscoe, Tomio, Tristan, Cole, Yukio, and Noah. Preceding her in death are her parents Mike Kumataro and Mitsuko (AKA Mitsuno), brothers Charles Toru and Kenji Henry, husband Azuma, and son Miles. Mieko has been laid to rest at Live Oak Memorial Park in Monrovia, California.