

Yuri Kochiyama

(1921–2014)

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MAY

Yuri Kochiyama's activism against racism, war and hatred was conceived in the incarceration camp, nurtured in the Jim Crow south, and ignited at the Harlem Freedom School.

Mary Yuriko Nakahara was born in San Pedro, California, to first-generation Japanese immigrant parents. The Nakahara family was forced to relocate to an incarceration camp in Jerome, Arkansas, shortly after the American naval base in Pearl Harbor, Hawai'i, was bombed on Dec. 7, 1941. To escape the camp, in 1944, Yuri volunteered to work at an all-Japanese, segregated United Service Organizations center in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. There, she met William "Bill" Kochiyama, a Japanese American who had enlisted in the U.S. Army to prove his patriotism. It was at the USO in Hattiesburg that Yuri first witnessed Jim Crow.

In 1960, Yuri and Bill moved into the Manhattanville Housing Projects in Harlem where they saw firsthand the struggles faced by their Black and Latino neighbors. She became a vocal civil rights activist, often holding meetings in her apartment. After meeting Malcolm X in October 1963 and making the connection between the freedom struggles of Black Americans and the struggles of people of African and Asian descent around the world, Kochiyama's focus broadened to a fight for human rights.

For more than 50 years, Kochiyama remained dedicated in her fight against racism, hatred and war. She became a pioneer of the Asian American movement; advocated for Puerto Rican independence; and fought against Islamophobia after the Sept. 11 terror attacks. She died on June 1, 2014, at the age of 93.



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