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Title: Donald K. Tamaki Interview
Narrator: Donald K. Tamaki
Interviewer: Naoko Wake
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<Begin Segment 10>

NW: Um, in terms of uh, your work for Asian Law Caucus and uh, I'm not sure if you belong to other Asian American, um, organizations including legal, attorneys' organizations? Um, was there a sense that um, of course the internment camp issue is hugely, uh, central to Asian American history in many ways, but um, the nuc—anti-nuclear uh, movement was also something to be considered as a community?

DT: Well um . . . you know, the issue of social change is so huge and so difficult that if you can find an issue where you can move the needle a little bit, you know, change around the margins, then certain issues have greater potential than others. And um, some have a very limited shelf life, to put it mildly. Like uh, the message of A-bomb survivors is as long as they're living. You know, once they're gone, they are gone. So, like it was—I think was important to um, get their message out while they're willing to do this, as long as they're here. Uh, and um, my way of thinking is, um, is to how social change happens, at least in America is—is that great mass in the middle. That's where the change happens. And uh, um, how do you reach that? How do you get on that radar screen? That's the issue. And so . . . what we are doing—what we . . . it's a, my view of how social change happens is that the symbolic . . . uh . . . um . . . results are as important as the concrete ones. So, when I was at the Asian Law Caucus, we were doing poverty, providing poverty law services for the San Francisco area. And . . . of course it was limited funding, limited funding in the organization. And it just occurred to me, you know, that we could triple our staff and triple our budget and we wouldn't make a dent in the legal problems just in Chinatown, let alone in all of the Bay Area. And so, um . . . you know, Chinatown itself has the highest concentration of tuberculosis, and the greatest level of, of um, housing density. And at the time, you had uh, Asian, Chinese women, uh, working in sweatshops, garment factory, earning fifty cents to a dollar an hour. You know. Um, and then you have, you know, there's the garden-variety cases like um . . . that are serious, but, uh, endless domestic violence. Um . . . people getting evicted out of their housing. Uh, uh . . . being cheated and different kinds of things. Um, and so on. So, the question was, are there . . . are there cases that are better . . . and more susceptible to changing values than others? And so, we used to, at the Law Caucus take everybody that came in the door. So if they had a divorce that they wanted to handle and they couldn't afford a lawyer, maybe we'd do that. But, the question is where, where do you focus your precious time and your money? And so, um, we found that there were cases that had more potential for organizing, that after the legal case would be over, there would be an institution, you know, working away. And so, for instance, um, labor law, laboring was good. Like, you, we could do a compelling case like representing garment factory workers working in sweatshop

conditions, being cheated out of minimum wage, not being paid overtime, working at a dollar an hour, and we definitely could get the public's attention.

NW: Mhm.

DT: And then after the case is over, there would be a labor union . . . that would continue to fight.

NW: Right.

DT: Um, immigration was another area we thought that, that had the ability to change . . . hearts and minds in the middle. And housing was another one. So, um, one of the housing lawyers at the Asian Law Caucus at the time was, uh, Ed Lee, who's now the mayor of San Francisco.

NW: Mm. Ah.

DT: But, um, I—I remember Ed as suing the city—the city that he is now the mayor of.

NW: Mm.

DT: Multiple times for, uh, dangerous and just terrible housing. So, um . . . you know, we're looking for issues that would have, ok, you can do a little bit here, but the symbolic value, the education value is greater. So, same with Koramatsu Hirabayashi, Yasui. It's just one guy, you know, fighting the system. But, the overall goal is to make sure this never happens to anybody . . . ever again. And how do you educate that people . . . at that level? How do you get to the middle? Well, if you have a case . . . that allows that, uh, that's a better case than something that just one person, and the impact is just that one guy, so.

NW: So do you think helping out U.S. survivors was one of those cases that had the value, or?

DT: Yeah, sure. You know, I mean, to the extent that uh, you can further the um, discussion about why um, proliferation is not a good idea. Um nuclear weapons, and . . . um . . . I mean, of course, if they can get medical care along the way, great. But the bigger message is, you know, nuclear war shouldn't—is obsolete. It's an obsolete concept.

NW: Uh-huh.

DT: So, um . . . I think that was the more, the rest of it.

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