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A journey back to East L.A.

Don Nakanishi was born and raised in the area and attended Roosevelt High before heading to Yale. The UCLA professor backs cityhood as a way of preserving the area.

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April 9, 2010

After World War II, Don Nakanishi's parents mostly kept silent about the past.

During the war, the government locked up 110,000 Japanese Americans in internment camps. The Nakanishis were among 17,000 Southern Californians held in Poston, Ariz., for more than two years.

But the U.S. was also the country where the Nakanishis' two boys were born and raised after the war. And they didn't want their sons to see their native land as intolerant.

"My parents wanted to shelter us," said Nakanishi, now 60. "They wanted to give us a more hopeful perspective of what America stood for."

The Nakanishis found that hopeful vision in the hilly, ethnically diverse neighborhoods east of the Los Angeles River, where Japanese Americans lived side by side with whites and Latinos.

There aren't many Japanese American families left in unincorporated East Los Angeles. Don Nakanishi now lives in nearby El Sereno. But he remains devoted to the place where his parents lived -- and where he spent a happy boyhood.

A UCLA professor and pioneer in Asian American studies, Nakanishi has also long been active in the push to make East Los Angeles a city.

Back in 1975, he penned his first plea for the community's independence, saying it would help protect residents against racism, official neglect and urban decay.



"My roots are here," he wrote. "And one does not allow the destruction of one's home any more than one allows the destruction of one's self."

This week, Nakanishi stood in the yard of his old East L.A. home and told me: "What makes me into an Asian American was getting an identity as a Chicano first."

That might sound like an odd statement, but it made perfect sense to me after listening to Nakanishi describe his life in the old East L.A., a community that brought together working people of different races and creeds and made them all stronger in the process.

In the 1960s, Nakanishi lived in City Terrace and attended Roosevelt High. "When I ran for student body president, I decided I needed to target new voters," Nakanishi told me. "So I went to the [English as a second language] class and talked to people in English, Spanish and Japanese." He won.

Carlos Haro, a retired UCLA professor, knew Don back then. "All the Japanese kids were such good students," he said. "They motivated me."

Nakanishi inspired his Roosevelt classmates. East L.A. in turn nurtured him and gave him a strong sense of belonging to a diverse community.

When Nakanishi was a small boy, a neighbor walked him to a nearby Hebrew school every afternoon for "day care": He played on the school playground while the neighbor studied inside. Most of his closest friends were Mexican Americans. They taught him about toughness and community pride, which would come in handy when he left for Yale in 1967.

Yale at that time was almost entirely white. And on Dec. 7, the anniversary of the Japanese attack on Hawaii, white students entered his dorm room and pelted him with water balloons, yelling "Attack Pearl Harbor!" He was humiliated, he said. "I'd never faced anything like that before."

Nakanishi realized how little he knew about Japanese American history. So he visited the Yale library and found a book about the internment. The authors described how a century of anti-Asian racism in California had made the internment possible. "It was the first Asian American studies book I'd ever read," he said.

But his first organized act against discrimination was alongside Yale's small cadre of Mexican American students, including L.A. native Carlos Moreno, a future California Supreme Court justice. He joined 10 Latinos in forming a group called Los Hermanos, Spanish for "the brothers." The group later evolved into Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán.

"I didn't think there was anything wrong with being a member of MEChA, and neither did they," he said.

At about the same time, Nakanishi's old Roosevelt classmate Haro helped form the first Latino student organization at UCLA.

Both groups were inspired by the more advanced black student movement, which was demanding curriculum changes and increased recruitment of minority students and faculty.

Later, Nakanishi joined another Japanese American kid from East L.A. to form Yale's first Asian American

student group. "The Chicanos learned from the blacks, and we learned from the Chicanos," Nakanishi said.

Nakanishi graduated from Yale and later got a doctorate from Harvard.

When he returned to L.A. in the late 1970s, he ended up at UCLA. He found an Asian American Studies Center already in place there, thanks to the efforts of Haro and other activists. They had helped persuade UCLA officials to create four ethnic studies centers in 1969.

Nakanishi eventually became director of the Asian American program, working side by side with Haro, who helped lead the Chicano Studies Research Center.

Thanks in part to two guys from East L.A. the curriculum at UCLA today more fully reflects the diversity of the American experience.

But East Los Angeles itself is now more ethnically segregated than ever. As late as 1970, one in six East L.A. residents was white. Now East L.A. is 97% Latino, and it's not likely that a Roosevelt student could win an election speaking Japanese.

Nakanishi believes East Los Angeles is segregated, in part, because most of the community's educated members have moved away. A city government would have worked harder to preserve local business, he said. "If this place had become a city 35 years ago, it would be much more vibrant today."

Now Nakanishi is working to help a new generation of activists meet an April 29 deadline to raise \$140,000 for the next step toward cityhood -- a study on whether an independent city would be economically viable.

It might be too much to hope that East L.A. can return to the sort of place it was. But Nakanishi still feels he owes a lot to his old neighborhood. That's why he's going back there to fight on its behalf.

It's a skill he first learned in East L.A., many years ago.

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