Remarks by Eric K. Yamamoto, Fred T. Korematsu Professor of Law and Social Justice (October 13, 2012)

Introduction Dina Shek, Distinguished Service Award, JACL Luncheon Award

Liann and Trisha (and Matt Shinmura), and everyone here, aloha to you all (and congratulations to Louise and the Alston firm).

“If you have a feeling that something is wrong, don’t be afraid to speak up!” Those words are Fred Korematsu’s. They’re at the top of your invitation for today. And they’re deep in the spirit of one of your Distinguished Service Awardees: the wonderful Dina Shek. And those words link Dina and me and, in some ways, are the reason I’m having the honor of introducing her.

Some years ago, just before 9/11, Dina was a community organizer in San Francisco. She was in charge of orchestrating the huge Day of Remembrance (of the internment and redress) for the entire Bay Area. We’re talking more than 500 attendees (including many staid aging Nisei and vibrant young social justice advocates). Dina, still working on her masters and teaching Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State (and well before law school), didn’t want the event program to simply repeat the triumphalist narrative common to many prior Days of Remembrance – that a terrible wrong occurred but Japanese Americans persevered and achieved justice proving the system works; that things are now fine.

Dina had a deep feeling that “somethings are still wrong.” She sensed, rightly, that in America the potential for scapegoating marginalized groups during times of distress persisted. So Dina strongly wanted to “speak up,” to have the Day of Remembrance speak up to the Japanese American community to say “even though we rightly fought for and achieved redress”, there’s so much more that we need to be doing for others in fighting for justice.” We need to extend beyond ourselves. But this was risky, given the make-up and expectations of the crowd.

Dina asked me – in that charming way that won’t allow you to say no – to come to San Francisco and give the keynote speech

conveying that theme – I’d been writing about it for scholars, but not speaking it to Asian American communities. The long and short of it is that I think Dina’s vision, channeled through my lips, and her entire multifaceted
program with dance, music, slam poetry and more – made a real impact on the JA community, the youth especially. The event title captured the message: Remembrance Through Action. Remember, not to celebrate, but as foundation for future action. And the Japanese American community did act after 9/11, and continues to do act, in support of Arab and Muslim neighbors and against harmful scapegoating in the name of national security.

And that’s Dina. She came to the Richardson Law School to do social justice work – learning theory to guide action. And she has done so magnificently. Faster, better and more intensely (right out of law school) than anyone I know (anywhere)! She became a prominent Scholar Advocate (as part of the special training program for students interested in social justice). Her work with families in Family Court; her starting from scratch the awesome Medical Legal Project that’s helped so many, built so many bridges, opened so many doors; the speaking, publishing, teaching, mentoring, amicus briefs (on Micronesian medical care); the ties she’s developed with the Micronesian community as advocate and conciliary – all taken together...path- forging...inspiring! (Like the outstanding continuing work of JACL-Honolulu.

And through it all, Dina has remained to me (and many others) a dear and wonderful friend. I can’t tell you the number of times she and Cardan brought Cardan’s gourmet healthy food to me and my mom (when she was still with us) during times of need. Always with a smile, always with plenty caring.

So Dina, in the light of Fred Korematsu’s words and spirit....and

in your own amazingly special way of “remembering through action”....we all of JACL and friends say to you, “Mahalo Nui Loa and heartfelt Congratulations” on your receipt of the Distinguished Service Award.

Remarks by Dina Shek JACL Annual Meeting (Honolulu) October 13, 2012

Thank you Eric for the generous (and only slightly exaggerated!) introduction. I am truly grateful to you for so many things, not the least of
which is guiding (and cajoling!) me to Hawaii and to Richardson Law School, my home for the past nine years.

And thank you so much to the JACL Board for this honor today and for all the work you’ve done, to promote National Resolutions in support of the Micronesian community, to speak out against discrimination in Hawaii, and to partner with so many of us to build a more just community. Your team is amazing and especially to Trisha, Liann, and Jacce—thank you.

I just have three things to share with you today: something about my name, some gratitude, and a quick story.

First, just to clarify any confusion, my last name is Shek. It’s a rather unusual Chinese name. My father immigrated from Northern China, via Hong Kong. But deep down, I’m so JA! My mom, who is here today, was born in Lodi, California, as was her mother, my Grandma Kono. And during WWII, my grandparents raised four of their seven children while incarcerated in internment camps at Rohwer, Arkansas and Tule Lake, California. So, that’s something about my name, just in case you were wondering.

Second, some gratitude. What’s perhaps missing from Eric’s introduction of me is that all of the work he described—from organizing the Day of Remembrance to surviving Law School to running the Medical-Legal Partnership—has all been done in collaboration with:

Amazing mentors, who push and guide me, even throw me into the fray;
Tireless partners, who prop me up when I’m frustrated, stir new ideas to push the strategies forward, and make me laugh when it’s so needed;
And now that I’m a little older, this work is done in collaboration with my own students and mentees, some of the most incredible young people, from whom I learn even more than I try to teach.

And especially today, to the friends I’ve made through my work with the
Micronesian community, I’m so grateful for your generosity, patience, and deep friendship through this journey. You can’t stay in this work if you don’t bring an open heart and an awful lot of love to the table, because there is so much heartache, but there is also so much joy. And you can’t really experience the triumphs without being “all in.”

I’m also grateful for knowing this community in a way that much of Hawaii just hasn’t experienced. Earlier this year, a prosecutor asked a judge in court to “send a message to the Micronesian community” by imposing the harshest sentence. In a follow-up editorial he tried to explain his comment by saying it was based on his “personal perspective...”

And that’s just the problem.

With his courtroom blinders on, this is all he knows of the Micronesian community. He should spend a day with me, where he would see all my Chuukese colleagues at KKV health center, doing some of the most amazing health outreach, medical care, and community advocacy work every single day. He would see so many of my Micronesian clients who work one, two low-wage jobs, struggling to build better lives for their children. He would see my friends and collaborators like Jojo, a PhD candidate who already holds a double Masters degree, serves as a professor and administrator at the College of Micronesia in Chuuk, and who we secretly call “the puppet master” for his ability to pull anyone into his trajectory to support the cause. And my Marshallese doctor friends who, in their spare time, run the Micronesian Health Advisory Coalition to strengthen the community and build bridges across all Pacific peoples in Hawaii. So, my point. When you say “Micronesian,” I see them. Not the barrage of negative images on the news that most of Hawaii sees.

So, if I have just two more minutes for a short story, especially for my fellow JACL members. Many years ago, I was working on my Masters thesis in Ethnic Studies, writing a paper on the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 that provided for Japanese American Redress. I was critiquing the rhetoric of loyalty as the criteria for being “deserving” of redress. And I found Mike Masaoka’s 1940 Japanese American Creed to be a glaring example of this thread of superpatriotism, this 200% Americanism, that was often used to justify redress. As a young, self-righteous grad student, I actually used some of his words as my screensaver (back in the 90’s when our screensavers

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were just a little quote that ran across the screen). And the words I used were:

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“... in the hope that I may become a better American in a greater America.” Mike Masaoka promoted this superpatriotism to oppose any forms of dissent or protest against internment. He remained staunchly against people who challenged the constitutionality of the interment (people like Min Yasui, Gordon Hirabayashi and Fred Korematsu). So, I used these words mockingly, to fire me up and spur me on to write about that very dissent.

But a funny thing happened over the many years I spent on this

thesis. (yes, too many years!) I realized that, in a different context, this was exactly what I was striving for. Being a better American in a greater America. Because dissent is patriotic. And challenging an injustice is perhaps the most important thing we can do to promote the fairness and equality that is the promise of true democracy. So, even if we came at these words from very different perspectives, I came to embrace this idea, of being a better American, a better citizen, in a greater America, one that is truly just and lives up to its stated ideals.

I believe that this work we do together—side-by-side, working from the ground up—makes our community stronger, demands a better and stronger democracy, and heals each of us and the connections between us, to make that “greater America.”

Thank you so much to the JACL and to all of you today for this gift of your friendship, your partnership, and your support. Thank you.