



Judge Mamoru Sakuma Class of 2013

Mamoru Sakuma was born in Oroville in 1918 and graduated with honors from Oroville High School (OHS) in 1936. He was a member of the Honor Society, the Block O Society and played basketball for his last three years. He was also very active on campus, serving as Student Body president and playing in the band and orchestra all four years. He is remembered as giving numerous speeches at OHS as well as organizing a group of student musicians to form a dance band and played for Saturday night dances at Feather River Canyon Lodge.

“Mamoo”, as he was known to family and friends in Oroville, received his bachelor’s degree in political science from University of California, Berkeley (Cal) in 1940. As a student there, he was a member of the marching band and the jazz band all four years. A highlight for him at Cal was marching with the band in the 1938 Tournament of Roses Parade in Pasadena, CA. While a student at Cal, the Japanese Internment occurred and Mamoru’s family was sent to an internment camp at Tule Lake Detention Center near the California-Oregon border.

He then served overseas in WWII with the all-Asian 442nd Nisei “Go for Broke” Regimental Combat Team in France and Italy. This 442nd Combat Team was the most decorated military unit in United States history. He attained the rank of Staff Sergeant and received his honorable discharge in 1945.

Mamoru then returned to Cal to complete his law degree from the Hastings College of the Law in 1949. He started his long and distinguished career in the legal profession in 1950 in Sacramento, CA.

From 1950 to 1963, Mamoru, a legal pioneer in Sacramento, was in private practice and described by his peers as a skilled trial lawyer. He was believed to be only the second Asian-American lawyer to open a private practice in Sacramento. In 1963, then Governor Pat Brown appointed him as judge in the Sacramento Municipal Court and a year later as Superior Court Judge. He served as judge in the higher court for twenty-one years before retiring to private practice in 1985. He then practiced law another twenty years, before formally retiring in 2005, ending his storied fifty-five year career as a trial lawyer and judge.

During his career, Judge Sakuma blazed the path for Asian-American lawyers and judges. As a lawyer, he tried over 400 bench cases, argued before the California and United States Supreme Courts, and mentored numerous young attorneys. He also helped usher in reforms in the grand jury selection process.

Many “firsts” graced the long career of Judge Sakuma. In Sacramento County, he was the first Japanese-American to be named to the bench and the first Asian-American judge of the Municipal Court, and later the Superior Court. His long time close friend, partner and colleague, Clement J. Kong states that “*Judge Sakuma’s storied career as a lawyer has very few equals.*” Mr. Kong also writes, “*As a veteran litigator, he was warm and outgoing and a courtly, old-school lawyer who shunned pages of deposition transcripts in favor of ‘nine words he wrote on a yellow pad to cross-examine a witness for hours.*”

The judge was also highly respected for his community work in Sacramento. He spoke many times to various groups, was a member of Veterans of Foreign Wars, and was elected to the Board of Directors, Aoki Diabetes Research Institute (ADRI). He was an avid Sacramento Kings fan and was one year away from receiving the highest fan recognition, a leather jacket, when he died.

Judge Sakuma died on January 29, 2011 at age 92. For 14 days flags at all court facilities in Sacramento flew at Half-Mast.

In his letter of support Clement Kong wrote, *“Despite all his legal and professional accomplishments, I don’t remember Mamoru for his unequalled career in the law. In the end, I like most people don’t care about fame, fortune, or celebrity. In the end, we admire a person’s goodness. We pay tribute to one’s honesty, integrity, kindness, courage – things that make a person better. Mamoru had these virtues and more. Knowing Mamoru was his gift to all of us, and it is only fitting that you honor him by selecting him to the OUHSD Hall of Fame. There is no more deserving honoree.”*

Mamoru is survived by his son Drew Sakuma of Danville, CA and his sister Tonayo, OHS class of 1938, of San Francisco.