Marielle B. Tsukamoto
Retired Principal & Past President of the Florin Japanese American Citizens League, Sacramento Valley
2020 President’s Medal for Distinguished Service

Marielle Tsukamoto embodies the vision and values of Sacramento State. Her lifelong commitment to education and innovative approaches to teaching about issues of Constitutional rights and inclusivity, along with her tireless community engagement, make her a treasure for our region, our state, and our nation.

In 1942, Ms. Tsukamoto and her parents were among more than 5,000 people of Japanese descent living in Sacramento who were forcibly evacuated and sent to live in U.S. concentration camps. On the morning they were sent away, Ms. Tsukamoto vividly remembers her grandmother crying in her precious flower garden, afraid she would never return home. At the tender age of 5, Ms. Tsukamoto took her grandmother’s hand and told her everything would be okay, and that she knew they would make it back someday. Fortunately, through the grace of a friend, Bob Fletcher, who tended their farm and paid their mortgage, and returned it, the Tsukamoto family was able to return to their Florin farm after the war in 1945. Only a few families were able to return. The town of Florin disappeared.

Ms. Tsukamoto was one of 120,000 people who were imprisoned during World War II. She openly shares stories of the humility, uncertainty, and fear inflicted on people of Japanese ancestry as a result of President Franklin Roosevelt’s Executive Order 9066. Those early experiences sparked her enduring passion for justice and her distinction as a teacher, community leader, civil rights activist, and public speaker. For example, Ms. Tsukamoto has been a spokesperson at a number of press briefings on protecting endangered civil rights, including protesting the Trump Administration’s policies relating to banning Muslims and the detention of immigrant children. “Unless you protect the Constitution for all persons,” said Tsukamoto, “everybody’s rights are in jeopardy.”

Like a nascent superhero, Marielle Tsukamoto did not choose her path. Rather, her life experiences formed her and compelled her to spend a life inspiring others to be more loving and kind to one another.