

NEWS

Gardena-Carson Community Adult School renamed for Kiriyaama

By **SANDY MAZZA** | sandymazza@hotmail.com |

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Photo Gallery

George Kiriyaama was passionate about teaching the history of Japanese-Americans, while furthering the civil rights of students and parents in the Los Angeles Unified School District.

For those reasons, and for his four-decade career in education, the Gardena-Carson Community Adult School was named after him in a ceremony Friday morning.

Kiriyaama died of liver cancer in 2005. He was 74.

On Friday, friends, family and former co-workers of the one-term Los Angeles Unified school board member gathered in front of the adult school, where Kiriyaama ended his career with a five-year term as principal.

They praised the district for agreeing to name it the George Kiriyaama Community Adult School. The facility is adjacent Gardena High School, at 18120 S. Normandie Ave. The school offers classes in the arts, various languages and cultures, computers, technical training, fitness and citizenship.

"Renaming the school is exactly the right thing to do," said Ed Morris, executive director of the district's division of adult and career education. "George knew the preponderance of students in this district live in poverty. Those children will live in poverty every day of every week of every month unless we do something to raise the quality of life. And it's through adult education that we do that."

Kiriyaama was born in 1931 in West Los Angeles and was educated in the Los Angeles Unified school system. During World War II, he spent more than three years in an internment camp. After his release, he returned to Los Angeles and graduated from University High School in 1950.

"I came out with scars, but I still think this is the greatest country in the world," he told the Daily Breeze in 1995.

Kiriyaama served in the U.S. Air Force during the Korean War. Then he earned a bachelor's degree in U.S. history from UCLA, a teaching credential from USC and a master's degree in school administration from Pepperdine University.

His wife of 36 years, Iku Kiriyaama, said her husband's name on the school buildings might not mean much to a lot of people. But, for those he taught, it will matter.

"The thousands of students who went to Gardena Adult School will remember him. He used to walk the campus. That put him in a position where the students really felt close to him," Iku Kiriyaama said. "Because of that, he was not Mr. Kiriyaama, he was George."

Assemblyman Warren Furutani, D-Harbor Gateway, attended the Friday dedication because he worked closely with Kiriyaama. Furutani endorsed Kiriyaama as his successor on the school board's District 7 in 1995. The district covers the Harbor Area and Carson, Gardena and Lomita schools.

"I was a dear, dear friend of the Kiriyaamas," Furutani said. "What I knew him to be was an educator who knew no bounds."

The Kiriyaamas together founded the Japanese American Historical Society of Southern California.

George Kiriyaama was credited with introducing a character-education program during his term on the school board. He also helped restore music and arts classes, opened the Wilmington Skills Center, and voted for teacher salary increases.

Richard Vladovic, the school board member now representing Board District 7, said Kiriyaama always thought about how his work affected children.

"He used to walk around with 'Kids First' badges and ask: 'What can we do for the kids?'" Vladovic said. "He championed the rights of the individual."

