

Mitsuhiro "Mits Joe" Kodama

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Question: Do you go by a nickname or do you go by Mitsuhiro?

Answer: Everybody calls me Joe.

Question: Calls you Joe? If I could get your first and last name so I have it on tape.

Answer: My name is Mitsuhiro Kodama.

Question: Do you go my a nickname or o you go by Mitsuhiro?

Answer: Everybody calls me Joe.

Question: Calls you Joe?

Answer: Yeah. That's 'cause I went to a parochial school after I came back from Japan when I was young, and I only spoke Japanese, and they says, Well, Maryknoll has a bunch of Japanese people and also the sisters, you know, they teach you English, and so that's where I went to Maryknoll, which is, well, you know where Providence Hospital is now? It's little bit below that.

Question: Oh, really. So it stuck all that time.

Answer: Oh, yeah. Well, when you go to a Catholic school, you know, they say you gotta have a Christian name, and I says, Well, I don't know. I think Joseph would be nice and I said, Oh, ok. So they gave me the name Joseph. I never use Joseph or Joe at work, because you have to use your legal name, but my wife calls me Joe, you know, and somehow or another I could sort of relate people, if they call me Mits, which is short for Mitsuhiro, and also if somebody calls me Mitsuhiro, then I can relate to other people, and also Joe, which is now most people call me Joe. Yeah.

Question: So when you get Mitsuhiro, is that telemarketers?

Answer: Right!

Question: So you were born in Seattle?

Answer: I was born in Seattle. Yes, and we had a house over on Rainier Valley, and I remember this white house that had goldfish ponds because my father was in the florist and selling goldfish aquarium, you know, equipment on Jackson Street there. And I remember seeing all these little goldfishes and stuff like that when I was quite young. But one of the things that happened, which is sort of unheard of, but my parents divorced way back when I was, you know, like 4 years old, and today I'm 74, and that's how, one of the reasons my mother took myself and my sister to Japan. And so we went to Yokohama, close to Yokohama, actually out in the outskirts, and I was there for about 2 years, and there was a lady that was visiting from Seattle, and she says, My father wants us to come to Seattle, because my mother, after leaving us with her parents, my grandparents, I don't know where she went, and so at that time, we said, my sister says, Well, let's go back, 'cause she's 4 years older than myself, and so we came back to Seattle.

Question: How old were you then?

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Answer: I was 7 I think. Somewhere around there.

Question: So do you remember being in Japan with your grandma?

Answer: Oh, yeah. In fact, I went to school in Japan, and that's why I spoke Japanese and was able to write the simple Japan characters and learn how to write my name in Kanji, which is the Chinese characters, yeah.

Question: What an interesting childhood 'cause I mean, thinking about a: being that young and the uniqueness, your Mom being divorced, your Dad being divorced. 'Cause, like you said,

Answer: Yeah. At those times, things like that never happened. Yeah.

Question: And then being taken by boat all the way back.

Answer: Yeah. That's right. We took a boat and I remember running around on the boat and eating the different foods, and people getting sick, and you know, I had a great time.

Question: When you got back, did your Dad remarry ever?

Answer: He remarried after World War II, but prior to that, you know, he just worked at the wholesale florist as a salesperson then.

Question: Was that his company or he worked for somebody?

Answer: No, no, he worked for a company called David L. Jones, which is, I think, Boren or 7th and Stewart or someplace around in that area. 'Cause we lived in an apartment on Pike Street when we came back from Japan, and I remember walking to school. They also had a school bus that picked us up too, but when you start getting a little older, when I say little older, 9, 10, you don't want take a school bus. You walk or you ride the bicycle.

Question: So was that a pretty international district?

Answer: No. The proprietor, owner of the hotel apartment was Japanese-American, but the occupants were all Caucasian, yeah.

Question: Do you remember where you were when Pearl Harbor happened? Were you old enough to remember that?

Answer: Well, I was still at the same apartment, you know. I don't recall too much about Pearl Harbor, other than what you see in the newsreels, you know, and stuff like that, but it didn't strike me one way or the other, you know, and my Dad never said, Oh, Japan is fighting United States or America or nothing like that.

Question: You didn't face any, like going to school after Pearl Harbor..

Answer: No, no, I didn't have any prejudice against me or to my buddies that I used to go to school with, you know. 'Course all of us in school were mostly, well, there were a few Chinese and a few Filipino students, but the rest were all Japanese-

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American, so I sort of grew up in that stage, you know, where I never had too much contact with Caucasians.

Question: Do you remember, 'cause now you, with you Dad and your sister, went away to one of the camps?

Answer: Yes, we went to Puyallup Assembly Center, and there again you're told to just bring whatever that you can carry. Of course, I didn't have too many things, you know, but I do remember that I regret not taking my comic books that I used to have, which is priceless today, you know, but ..the barracks themselves we were put in, you might call, horse stalls, you know, and we got there and they told us, they gave us some sheet like thing and canvas and we had to go over and put the straws into it to make our mattress, and there was no apartment per se, you know. There was just stalls, so, and you know, you could hear the neighbors talkin' and babies cryin' and so forth like that. They had a mess hall there where we got in line and ate whatever they gave us, and you know, being that I never had a mother to cook for us and maybe my father came home from work and prepared little things, and my sister probably helped out later on, 'cause then she was older than myself, but I don't remember even too many things, you know, and I always used to tell the kids, I says, God, you guys are lucky, you got a refrigerator..., you know, we never had a refrigerator, just a cooler box that air would cool. I said I used to fight the little mices for my butter, you know. They say, Ah, Dad, quit pulling our legs, you know, but I say, God, you guys, today the homes that kids have now. It's priceless compared to what I put up with when we first got married. What did we pay? \$5,000 or \$6,000 for our home? I don't know when we first got married, you know. We lived in Skyway, near Renton, there, and we thought that was big bucks, you know, well, I was working at Boeing at that time, and I said, Gee, can we afford this, you know, plus have a car and gasoline. Of course, things are a lot cheaper at that time, too, but now if you try to buy the same house that we lived in, maybe \$80,000 or \$100,000. Yeah.

Question: Yeah, if you'd kept those comic books and that house, you'd be....

Answer: Yeah, that's right.

Question: It is hard, and again, I'm would be your children's age, basically, and it is hard for a lot of us to fully understand the reality of what you're describing and not think that oh, they're just pulling our leg, but that really was what it was like.

Answer: That's true, yeah.

Question: Here's a country coming out of a Depression, then the war, and people like your father working hard to build things up and then you benefited that, and then your children benefited your hard work.

Answer: Yeah.

Question: Do you remember, did you stay at Puyallup, Camp Harmony, as they called it for very long or was that just a

Answer: I can't recall, maybe we stayed there maybe 3, 4 months or somewhere around there. Anyway, when we went to Minedoka, Idaho. We didn't have school in Puyallup, ok. And naturally I made a lot of friends with, because it

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was a fairground, you know, but going back to Minedoka there, they say, Ok, how old are you and I say well I'm 14. They say, ok, you're in 1st year high school then. I said, Yeah, but I never graduated out of grade school, and I tell kids that and they say, Oh, Dad, quit pulling our leg again, 'cause everybody, in order to go to high school have to graduate out of grade school, you know. Then I say, Yeah, I says, Well, I never graduated out of high school neither because after being there about 3 years, you know, of course, I was a junior by then in high school, but Dad went to.. took myself to Mt. Eden, California. My sister when to Chicago on her own, and she was, learned to be an x-ray technician, 'cause she's naturally, 4 years older than me, you know, 18, 19, and my father ran a nursery as a foreman for this Japanese family called Shibata, and that's another thing. The Shibata family had 4 sons? Yeah, 4 sons in the service, and the oldest one, since he was running a business then, he had brothers in service that he only had to go, what, a week to Camp Ord or something for training, you know, whereas the other 4 or other 3 brothers, they all became officers, which is unheard of, you know, that one family would have 4 US officers.

Question: And that's who your Dad went to work for, that

Answer: Yeah. That family there, and they had greenhouses and carnations, roses, and different kinds of other flowers, you know, that

Question: so is that, did your father go to work for them after the war?

Answer: Yeah. That was after the war, because we were in camp 3 years and then

Question: 3 years?

Answer: Yeah, that's when I told my kids, well I never graduated out of high school in camp, you know, because I was only a junior.

Question: So then did you have regular high school when you were in camp?

Answer: Yes, there was regular classes, and you could actually attend 8 periods, you know, where nowadays you could attend 5 or whatever, you know. So actually I did have enough credits to say that I could have graduated, but we left before graduation, and all that kind of stuff, you know.

Question: Did you do sports, like high school today you can join the football team?

Answer: Oh, yeah, but being as small as I was I never did get to participate in sports in Hunt, Idaho, or Minedoka, but we did play, you know, baseball, basketball, and we did in the rec-rooms we had, we played ping pong, which I thought I was pretty good at that time, playing ping pong, but other than that. And then when I went to Hayward High School is the one that I went to in California. I was on the wrestling team. 103-pound class, but other than that, I didn't get to play any major sports.

Question: What was, being in the camp, what was life like? I mean, did you hang out with your buddies, was it like living in another city, or were you aware you were aware you were in a?

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Answer: Well, mostly I just hung around with the kids in the block, and played baseball, basketball, whatever, and we used to line to come over eat. Oh, that was another thing, when we first went there, we were about the first ones to get into Minedoka, and so a lot of the other barracks weren't built yet, and couple of us guys says, Gee, maybe we could help other people come in and like I told you, I was maybe 14 at that time, and couple of the other guys were 16, whatever, and they says, Hey, we like to help out other people coming into camp, so they gave us little tags and every tag is for that particular block to go eat, see, because you traveling back and forth whenever lunch time came. You can use the tag, so we had multi-colored tags, you know. And so, what we used to do is find out which one had the best dessert, you know, and go to that particular one, to say, ok, we have the tag, you know, and get their dessert, so that was when we helped out different people come in and, you know, help out. Settle in their barracks, or whatever.

Question: And get dessert.

Answer: And dessert.

Question: Again, it's interesting to see where the inner, how us as human beings adapt to situations.

Answer: Yeah. That's true, because when we first got there, it was so dusty, we couldn't believe the situation, and then when it snowed and rained and got muddy, 'cause you know, when you live in Seattle, we never had that kind of situation. It maybe rain, but you know, you wear raincoats and so forth, and your feet don't get muddy and all that, so in that respect it was pretty bad. We had a little pot bellied stove in every barrack room, you might say, and we used to have to go get the coal, or find pieces of wood that, or sage or whatever to warm our self because there was no central heating at all.

Question: So each family within the

Answer: block itself and had a little separate area, you had a little stove to warm themselves, and iron cots that we slept on, you know, and so forth, and they issued us blankets. Army blankets, and well, I don't know, there was no curtains or anything like that, and other than what people themselves, trade. There was a co-op store, that's right, that you could put your many things like that, yeah.

Question: I've heard that even though there were walls in between families, the walls only went up to the trusses.

Answer: Oh, no. That's only in Puyallup.

Question: Oh.

Answer: Yeah. The ones in the barracks in Minedoka, they were solid walls.

Question: Oh, it was, so you had a little more family privacy.

Answer: Yeah. Little more privacy.

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Question: But I would assume watching the blocks as kids, you could pretty well, 'cause there wasn't insulation, there was tarpaper.

Answer: Oh, yeah, yeah. That's true.

Question: So if somebody was in trouble, you knew.

Answer: Oh, yeah. You could hear.

Question: Don't get your friends today, because they're being yelled at by their Mom.

Answer: Yeah.

Question: When you remember, was this hard on your Dad, do you think? Do you remember his attitude or spirits?

Answer: I don't know. He, in those days, you know, my Dad never talked to us about situations. It's time to eat, or well, you're going to sleep, or you better take a bath, or those things, but I don't even recall sitting down, talking so called man-to-man talk or anything like that. He never did express how he even came to America. My sister married and her husband talked to my father quite a bit, and the records don't show it, but he served in the Russian-Japanese war and he was wounded and I remember a little hole in his shoulder here, that when I used to take a bath and I used to pour water in it, having a lot of fun with it. And then apparently, after he got well they told, Go back to the front again, and whether he deserted or he said, No, or was put in internment, not internment, but in prison, what did they jail, that they have, I don't know how, but anyway, he, and he was the oldest son, too, so when he came to American then, you know, he worked at many different jobs and made enough money that he started his own flower shop business, you know and so forth. The second son remained naturally in Japan, and I think he started a school in Japan. And by that time, then, too, my father was making money and so forth, so he used to send money back to Japan to his younger brother to support all the relatives, kids and so forth, and we did go back to Japan. Was it '81 or '82, somewhere around there, and we start to talk with this one cousin who was, well, they're bilingual. They speak Japanese, English, and they're all highly educated, and he was working as some director for a trading company called Marubeni, and his name is Kazu Kodama, and he took us around different areas and one of the other cousins son works for the government, and they, the government has different areas that government employees can go take vacation and so forth, so he had arranged for us when we went there to go to these different places, and the fact that he worked for the government didn't cost, but I don't know how much because I never paid for it, but you know. Less than an average person never get a chance to go to these kind of places. And went to the hot springs and stuff like that, you know, and. Then one of the other cousins when we were in Tokyo, he says, Well, you gotta come eat, and so he naturally took us to one of the restaurants and then I found out later that he has about 7 restaurants in Tokyo area, and then I said, ok, I have to pay, and they say, Oh, no. no. Anyway, then we found out later that my father was sending money to their parents and so that's how they got started and gone to college and to whatever, to businesses or whatever, and so they try to pay me back through because of my father, and we had a great time.

Question: So your father must have been a very hard worker.

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Answer: Well, he did and not only that, he went to school here, too, you know and he learned how to speak and write English and, you know. Of course, he knew Japanese. And I don't know too many so called Isseis' going to high school or college to get a degree in whatever subject that he was taking, so I guess he was pretty smart. Not like me. I'm the not so smart guy.

Question: Oh, that's not true. 'Cause you were in Japan until you were...

Answer: about 7 years old.

Question: So, do you remember enough Japanese that you can?

Answer: Yeah, that's another thing, too, see when I came back, since I went to school 2 years, I knew how to add and subtract, you know. Whereas, when you come to first grade, not too many, they weren't teaching addition and subtraction until you got in maybe 2nd or 3rd grade, I think. I'm not too sure, but I was able to get the answers right away, but it when it came to some spelling words, well, you know, I have a hard time with that and reading and stuff, because we did have English books and so forth at Maryknoll.

Question: How long did you end up in the camp?

Answer: We were there one thousand, one hundred and eleven days. My records show that. That's how I remember.

Question: Is that your records from, that you kept or that they government

Answer: Government kept, and I gave Adolph the sheet that War Relocation, yeah, that little sheet that I have, and it tells something about that.

Question: What did you think about the, I think Reagan started it but George Bush signed it, the apology, basically?

Answer: Well, it should have never happened, you know, really. But things did happen and when they say they going to pay us so much, and if you divide the amount of days that you were there to the money value that they gave us, it's hardly anything, but that's not the point. The point is that today things like this is happening again because of the, you know, wars that's going on and terrorists and so forth, but at that time, when we hear about it. So what, you know. I didn't give too much thought to say, Thank you, Mr. President, for sending me this little letter saying that the government apologize and so forth, but I guess I wasn't into that type of politics or anything. All our concern is have a good job, feed the kids and the family and stuff like that, but I made a comment that the value that they gave us, you can't even buy a car with that, so, but I was very fortunate that I was working at the Boeing airplane company, and I got into the commercial side, and I must have had somebody looking after me, because I got into design engineering management there, and as long as you have good workers, it makes you look good, so I'm very fortunate in that case.

Question: Have you ever talked to your kids about it? I know I asked your wife that question. Have they ever asked you about, Hey dad?

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Answer: No, I told think my kids ever asked me about camp that I can recall.

Question: They'd think you were pulling their leg.

Answer: Yeah, again. Every time I say something, 'cause you know, a lotta times I do, I joke them and kid them about this and that, so

Question: Do you think that there is a message or a piece of history that should be put back into the books for your grandchildren and great-grandchildren that won't be old enough to talk to you and find out about this?

Answer: I think they are starting to write more about it in the history books, and I know that well, another thing, too, is that the younger kids today, when I say younger, you know, 9, 10, 11, 12, that age bracket. They know how to use the computer, and so they're getting a lot of this stuff quicker than when we were growing up, so not to say that they are smarter that we are at that age, too, but I give a lot of credit to the younger generation coming up.

Question: That's one thing that probably today's generation might not think about is how different communication was then compared to now, because. I never thought about that, but think if you had email then, how different it might have been.

Answer: Yeah.

Question: Should we do it, should we not do it?

Answer: And those things, too, see, when I had my office working at the Boeing Company there, I had a computer, Macintosh, but it would always crash, so I said, when my boss wants me I says, Call me on the telephone! I'm so used to the old concept. And so later on when we moved to Bainbridge, then our, my so-called brother-in-law, my wife's sister's, you know Jane's husband, gave us a computer, because he says he helped a guy move a computer equipment, and the guy says, Hey, you want these computers, so he took a few. But he kept one good one for himself and he said he got this one. Then found out later that his son-in-law looked at the computer that they were going to give me and says, Hey, that's better than the one I have, so he brought his in there and I got the old one, but then we used to do all this stuff, but then later on I said, Oh, heck with that, but then recently my daughter and husband living in Portland, the youngest, they gave us a laptop and I says, I'm not going to fool around with a computer anymore, so Lilly's the only one that emails, writes up her records for her historical museum recording secretary she is now, and so forth. I don't even write letters. I'm so used to dictating to a secretary or something that, you know, Lilly, Can't you write your own. I say, Well if I have to write it, I say, Would you mind calling and I'll get on the phone. She gets mad at me for that.

Question: Oh, things have changed.

Answer: And you get to be so old, too, you know, you don't want to do anything more than. You drink, smoke, whatever. And I don't like to travel anymore. Well, my wife, I don't know if she told you, but she was working for United Airlines as the Registered Nurse giving physicals to all employees at one time, and so we get, what do they call it, standby passes and so forth, so we used to go

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California, Reno, Vegas, Florida, Cape Kennedy, Georgia, whatever, Washington, DC, and but I tell Lilly now. I says, I can't sit that long. You can walk around on the plane, but still.

Question: No more traveling.

Answer: No, no more traveling. I says, If it takes longer than an hour and one-half, forget it. But we do have a daughter living in Mt. Vernon area, and we go there and there place, since Rod is in the business of Planning Design is the company's name, and he designs, you know, and has a crew put in all the so-called gardens, displays of big monuments and whatever, but you know, when you start saying about being prejudice and did you have any experience and so forth, I really haven't had any. Oh, there's one thing about prejudice. I always tell my kids, I'm really prejudice. I said, I'm prejudice for anyone taller than me! But other than that. We haven't had too much. At least I haven't, other than the people working, you know, that would round eyes, you know, we're the slant eyes and you're the round eyes, but guys that were working there, they're all good guys and they do what they're asked to do, and never had any problems of that type. It's well, I sort of led a sheltered life compared to some of the other people, you know, saying they had this incident happen or that.

Question: Lucky man.

Answer: Yeah. Lucky to be this old.

Question: Well, thank you very much.