

Minidoka Pilgrimage Project

By Matthew Diestch

For my Minidoka pilgrimage project, I had no idea what to do. I first thought of using my engineering degree to create a 3D piece of art or designing some kind of merchandise to help raise money and at one point even considered choreographing a dance. Looking back, I had always flirted with those ideas when the project was first introduced but I could never make it on base with any of them. After making absolutely zero progress over the past several months I resorted to writing about my pilgrimage experience. This decision did not come lightly since I had not written a nontechnical paper since my application essay for college, but I felt like writing about my experience was the best way to show the impact the scholarship had on my life.

Before diving into the pilgrimage itself, let me take you back a year ago when I first heard about it. It all started at UW's Day of Remembrance, hosted by Nikkei Student Union (NSU). I volunteered at this event because I was a member of NSU and it was a great opportunity to learn more about some of the history that Japanese Americans had faced during WW2. After the event was over, I ran into Grant, a former NSU member who I had met at a party a year prior. He is one of the most charismatic and effortlessly chill guys I had ever met so it was nice seeing him for the first time in over a year. He introduced me to his friend (now partner) Yoko and her twin sister Hana who were the original founders of NSU. As we were all chatting, Yoko brought up the pilgrimage and explained what it is. I had never heard of anything like this before and was initially skeptical. It sounded like a cool opportunity to learn and meet new people but how fun can it really be to go on a 12-hour bus ride to Twin Falls Idaho, in the middle of summer in the blazing heat to help volunteer and learn more about the incarceration camp. However, Grant was able to convince me that it is worth going since he went last year and that he loved it so much that he was already committed to go again. Also, the fact that you can apply for a scholarship to have everything already covered was enough to easily persuade me. I gave them my contact info and about 2 months later, when I had completely forgotten about it, Grant texted me to remind me to apply.

The application process was very straightforward, but I was nervous about some of my responses. However, I remember Yoko mentioning that the scholarship had a high acceptance rate, so I felt a little more at ease. After filling out the application, I waited anxiously before receiving the acceptance email. I was stoked to be chosen as a fellow since it gave me something to look forward to for the summer. Towards the end of May we had our first meeting at Tessa's place where I met the rest of the youth fellows. There were four other fellows who were around the same age as me and were either in college or had recently graduated. It was cool because they were all Japanese, so it was easy for me to connect with them even though I had just met them. Tessa was an excellent host who is truly one of the bravest people I had ever met for all the global humanitarian work that she is involved in. After that meeting I started attending most of the committee meetings which were basically every week in June. I liked those

meetings at first because they gave me the chance to meet the brains behind the pilgrimage and I learned more about what was going on behind the scenes. However, the meetings lasted a couple of hours, and I started to zone out after the first hour due to my short attention span. My favorite meeting was the last one because there was a delicious potluck, and we accomplished a lot of work by assembling the packets for all of the pilgrims. With the pilgrimage in nearly a week I was eager for what I hoped to be a life changing experience

The first day of the four-day pilgrimage was mostly spent entirely on the bus. We met at Blaine Memorial at 5:45 in the morning which was early for me but at least we had a twelve-hour bus ride to catch up on sleep. The bus ride there was smooth all thanks to our driver Tony who is the best bus driver ever. Once we had arrived at our location we had a solid opening dinner at a brewery in Twin Falls. This dinner was a great way to kick off the 2024 pilgrimage and to meet the rest of the pilgrims. Later that day we all checked into our hotel and watched the beautiful fireworks display before wrapping up the night with a trip to Denny's—a yearly tradition and my first time eating there in nearly fifteen years.

On day two of the pilgrimage we headed to CSI (College of Southern Idaho) where there were various sessions for pilgrims ranging from lectures about Japanese American history to an interactive traditional Japanese card game called hanafuda. The youth fellows were tasked to introduce the guest speakers to the audience and to make sure that they had everything they needed to carry out their session. The first session I attended was Dee Goto's, who is a local celebrity within the Japanese American community. She is an acclaimed author who is known for capturing the memories and documenting real life stories about the incarceration of Japanese Americans in WW2. During her session, everyone was given a chance to share a story or memory about their own or their families' experiences in camp. The goal was to collect all of these stories so that Dee could record and publish them in her upcoming book. The last session that I attended that day was learning how to play hanafuda with hand drawn custom cards where each card represented a part of history related to the incarceration of Japanese Americans. I thought this game was confusing at first, but it turned out to be a lot of fun once I had learned all of the rules. After spending a whole day at CSI, there was a special social event for the Minidioka youth where we all got to socialize and enjoy spectacular pizza with each other. This eventually transitioned to making our own mixed drinks and enjoying ourselves into the night.

Day three of the pilgrimage had begun and it was finally time to see the incarceration camp at Minidoka. This day was particularly special for everyone, and it was the main reason why everyone made the trek out all the way to Twin Falls, Idaho. I got assigned to the longest tour where we walked all around camp and visited several sites such as the barracks, root cellar, fire station and baseball field. Each location that we visited represents a part of history that should be preserved and never forgotten. I thought the tour led by the park rangers was excellent because they were able to

captivate what life was like for those who resided in the camp during the 1940's. It made me realize and appreciate how lucky I am today to be a part of a world where something like this would never happen again in the United States. I couldn't imagine how I would feel if I was forced to relocate by the US government as a US citizen all because of my race. Later that afternoon after lunch we headed back to CSI for our legacy sessions. The purpose of the legacy sessions was to reflect after visiting the site and it gave everyone an opportunity to talk about it. For many folks visiting the site brought back memories that were once forgotten, and it gave them the chance to share how it made them feel. People shared their raw emotions about how they felt visiting Minidoka in a safe space that allowed them to be vulnerable. This was the emotional high of the pilgrimage and many were brought to tears because of the emotional pain that their family had lived through. I will never forget this.

Later that evening we wrapped things up with a celebratory dinner with a mega raffle to help fundraise future scholarships. Soon after we started to celebrate the final night of the pilgrimage by dancing back at the hotel and playing music but little did we know everything was about to come to a screeching halt. In the middle of the party there was an announcement that several people had tested positive for covid-19. This was devastating news, and it completely killed the vibe. However, thanks to Emily Yoshioka who is a real-life superhero was prepared for this by acquiring hundreds of covid test kits and n95 masks beforehand. I was getting a little nervous myself since I had not been feeling well that day since my nose was stuffy, but I didn't think anything of it up until then. I went to bed praying that it was nothing but in the morning, I woke up feeling nauseated and straight up sick so I took the covid test. It was positive. I was bummed out because that meant I had to miss the closing ceremony, and it was a disappointing way to end the trip. It seemed 25 percent of the people who attended the pilgrimage got covid but if it were not for Emily, I could only imagine how much worse things would have been. The bus ride back was honestly the worst part. I think it was because I was sitting on a bus for 12 hours while feeling like a dog the whole time and I just couldn't wait to just be at home in my own bed. Getting back was a relief, and the entire committee did an excellent job coordinating everything so that all of the sick people would have a ride back.

Looking back six months later, it might not seem like the pilgrimage was worth going to, given how things had ended. However, even after the whole covid debacle I am still glad that I signed up and went as a youth fellow. I was able to not just learn about the hardships that people faced but I felt them through hearing from survivors and touring the camp. Coming out of college I feared that it would be harder to make friends, but this trip gave me the opportunity to meet new people who are now my friends. This year's group of youth fellows is a special one and I owe a lot to Yoko for organizing everything and taking care of us all.