



## Tribute to Rose Ochi

*“Rose Matsui Ochi, a trailblazing Los Angeles attorney who tapped far-flung political networks from City Hall to Congress in her fierce advocacy of civil rights, criminal justice reform and Japanese American causes, has died at 81. Ochi died Dec. 13 at a local hospital after being diagnosed with a second bout of COVID-19, which exacerbated existing health problems, her husband, Thomas Ochi, said.*

*Ochi broke barriers as the first Asian American woman to serve as a Los Angeles Police Commission member and as an assistant U.S. attorney general. She advised L.A. Mayors Tom Bradley and James Hahn on criminal justice, served on President Carter’s Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy and worked with President Clinton on drug policy and race relations.*

*But she particularly cherished her contributions to the successful campaigns to win recognition and redress for the mass incarceration of 120,000 people of Japanese descent during World War II – including her and her family, who were uprooted from their Boyle Heights home and imprisoned at the Rohwer detention camp in Arkansas after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor in 1941. She would play pivotal roles in helping the community win a federal apology and monetary payments to camp survivors in 1988 and secure approval of the Manzanar camp in the Owens Valley as a national historic site in 1992.”*

*Los Angeles Times, January 5, 2021*

### Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) and Redress

Ochi was involved in the JACL at the local, regional and national levels, as a member of the East L.A. Chapter’s board, a consultant for the Pacific Southwest District’s Redress Committee, a member of the board and executive committee of JACL-LEC (Legislative Education Committee). She was also a national JACL VP. In 1986, Ochi narrowly lost her race to become president of the JACL, losing by just two votes.

In the 1980’s, while working with the JACL, Ochi played an important role in the success of the national redress campaign to bring justice to Japanese Americans for human rights violations committed against them by the U.S. government during World War II.

Ochi writes that, “History is made by people, and personal relations can affect the outcome. At the signing ceremony for the Redress bill (which gave surviving camp internees \$20,000 each), President Reagan said, ‘Rose Ochi sent me an article.’ He proceeded to read from the article, about an Army captain presenting a medal to a Japanese American soldier’s mother, and how the blood spilled on the beach was all of one color. And then he, in his own style, said, ‘and the name of the captain is Ronald Reagan.’ I was happy that bringing this to his attention might have helped our redress efforts.”

### Manzanar

Ochi served for decades as pro bono counsel for the Manzanar Committee, initially helping to incorporate the organization as a non-profit, and providing advice and behind the scenes political support throughout the Committee’s efforts to protect Manzanar. After Manzanar was designated a National Historic Site in 1992, Ochi continued to work side-by-side with Sue Kunitomi Embrey, co-founder and chair of the Manzanar Committee, to mitigate opposition to the National Parks’ development of the site.



The Manzanar Committee's Bruce Embrey lauded Ochi's role with the organization. He said that Rose "helped navigate the federal bureaucracy as the site was being built, using many of her political connections to expedite things."

Ochi writes, "The National Park Service was looking at designating Manzanar as a landmark, and approached Mayor Bradley's office because the city's Department of Water and Power owned the property. I worked for passage of legislation to establish the Manzanar National Historic Site. That included gaining support in Inyo County, the City of Los Angeles, and in Congress. After the enactment, and the land transfer, I served as the chair of an Advisory Commission, assisting the National Park Service in preserving the site and telling its stories.

"Gaining community support for Manzanar was a major effort. At a public hearing, there was an elderly World War II vet, wearing his American Legion hat and jacket with medals. He said he was sent there to oppose us, but that he could not because he did not know until then that the interned were Americans. People came to understand that there were many, many Americans of Japanese ancestry who fought heroically in the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. 'Gee, they fought as Americans.' So, it is important to memorialize this episode in our history because there's so much misunderstanding. It is reassuring to know that hostility and hatred can just melt away when people are faced with truth.

"I've always been a person who believed in possibilities and in the promise of this country. To just have a small role in keeping the government honest, so to speak, is important. That is why I have dedicated over 30 years to creating and preserving the Manzanar National Historical Site.

"I want the story to be told, how in times of crisis, Constitutional protections are often ignored, and it's the responsibility of all Americans to protect the vulnerable. I want the future generations to understand there was a grave injustice, and that we need to learn from it. Manzanar and Redress are messages that this country is willing to acknowledge past injustices. As part of our legacy, Japanese Americans have a moral duty to ensure that this story be told so that our nation's 'Past is not Prologue.'"

### Tributes from the Community

#### William Fujioka (former Chief Executive Officer of Los Angeles County)

*"I worked Rose Ochi when I was on the Joint Powers Authority overseeing the construction of the Los Angeles Regional Crime Lab. However, this was not the first time that I heard of this incredible and trailblazing woman. I started my career with the City of Los Angeles in 1974 as an administrative intern. At that time, there were few Asian Pacific Islanders holding executive positions in public service. One of the few was Rose who was the Director of Criminal Justice Planning in the Office of Mayor Tom Bradley. For me, Rose was truly a "Unicorn". She was one of the few APIs who overcame many racial and gender barriers to rise in public service. For many of us, Rose became both an inspiration and role model. The example she set and her impact opened doors not only for other APIs but all ethnic minorities."*



JAMES HAHN (former Mayor of Los Angeles)

*"Rose Ochi worked tirelessly to see that justice was achieved in her community and our nation. To know Rose was to be brought into her circle of friends and admirers, because she wanted all of them to know of her affection for you. Loyal to a fault, Rose always let me know when she thought I needed a little constructive criticism. She was my mentor and friend, and a great friend to my dad, Kenny Hahn and his Chief Deputy, Mas Fukai. She continued that friendship with my sister Janice in her political career. She was a pillar of the Japanese American Community and seemed to be involved in every good work in our city. When I wanted a Police Commission that would work to implement community policing and bring much needed reform to LAPD, Rose Ochi was a necessary and important voice on that commission. There are few individuals in Los Angeles history who have served Mayors and Presidents with such distinction and were also so much fun to be with. I will miss you Rose. Thanks for sharing her with all of us, Tommy."*

Judy Chu (U.S. Congresswoman)

*"Rose Ochi paved the way for people like me. There were so few Asian American women in leadership positions as I was growing that I never even dreamed that I could be an elected official, let alone a Congressmember. But Rose was so bold that she was an inspiration to me. Despite having been raised at the Rohwer concentration camp, she continued to break barrier after barrier. Actually, I believe it was because she was raised in the camp that she broke those barriers. She sought positions that would allow her to fight for justice, such as the director of LA's Criminal Justice Office under Mayor Tom Bradley. She was the first Asian American woman to be appointed to the LA Police Commission. And then, she made her mark in Washington DC, becoming the first Asian American woman to serve at the assistant attorney general level, a US Senate confirmed position. Rose was passionate and compassionate, and always had a word of encouragement for me. I was lucky to have her as my constituent. I was lucky to have known her."*

Al Murasutchi (Assemblymember)

*"On January 11, the California Legislature adjourned to celebrate the life of civil rights activist and attorney, Takayo Rose Matsui Ochi, who passed away in December. I was honored to be able to speak about her life and memory. She spent her early life in American Concentration Camps during World War II, was the first Asian American woman commissioner on the Los Angeles Police Commission and the first Asian American woman Assistant Attorney General. Rose Ochi was a strong, beautiful woman who broke many barriers as the first Japanese American woman to serve in the highest levels of public service under President Bill Clinton and Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley, among many other leadership roles she served in. She inspired and supported many women and men like me to continue her legacy of service."*

Ed Chau (Assemblymember)

*I am deeply saddened that we have lost an incredible community and civil rights leader. Rose Matsui Ochi was a constituent in the 49th District and a well-known community figure. Her activism and advocacy was forged by the experience of being incarcerated along with 120,000 Japanese Americans in concentration camps during World War II. By witnessing injustice at an early age, Rose became a fierce champion and advocate for civil rights, Japanese American redress and criminal justice reform. We must remember her legacy and work by continuing to work for a nation that fights against inequity and push for greater justice for all.*

Timeline



Takayo "Rose" Matsui Ochi was born in East Los Angeles on December 15, 1938. During WWII, her family was sent to the Santa Anita Detention Center, followed by incarceration at Rohwer, Arkansas. While at Rohwer, she was given her name "Rose," by a Caucasian teacher. She acquired the surname Ochi when she married Thomas Ochi in 1963.

After the war, the family returned to Los Angeles. Rose attended UCLA graduating in 1959, and became a gym teacher for seven years. She got her Masters in Education in 1967 and then went to Loyola Law School, to focus on education reform. She received a poverty lawyer fellowship and was assigned to the Western Center on Law and Poverty, a public interest, law-reform firm, where she served as co-counsel on the landmark Serrano vs. Priest education case.

After earning her law degree in 1972, Ochi was a founding member of the Japanese American Bar Association (JABA), and she served on the L.A. County Bar Association's board of trustees.

In 1974, Rose went to work for Mayor Tom Bradley. She became a legislative research coordinator, and eventually executive assistant to the mayor. Under Bradley and Mayor Richard Riordan, Ochi was the executive director of the Mayor Office of Criminal Justice Planning.

From 1979 to 1983, Rose served on the Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy under appointment by President Jimmy Carter. Ochi pushed for immigration reform, including amnesty for those in the United States illegally.

In 1995, Rose was President Clinton's appointee to the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, where she served as the associative director, and later, was the director of the Department of Justice's Community Relations Service.

In 1997, Ochi was named an assistant attorney general to head the Department of Justice's community relations service office, which focused on race relations. Ochi was the first Asian American woman to serve at the Assistant Attorney General level under Janet Reno, where she also advised President Bill Clinton on matters of race relations.

When she returned to Los Angeles in 2001, she was appointed to the Board of Los Angeles Police Commissioners and was the first Asian American woman police commissioner, and in 2002, served as the executive director for the California Forensic Science Institute at California State University, Los Angeles.

In 2012, Rose Ochi was awarded the Sue Embrey Legacy Award (also known as the "Baka Guts" Award) at the annual Manzanar Pilgrimage.

Recently, she helped to rescue the Tuna Canyon WWII Detention Camp by getting Council approval for Historic Designation. Ochi believes it is our moral duty to preserve the regrettable moments in our nation's history in order that it never happens again. Ochi's main message is: become involved in the community, help when needed, and give back often. She has done so for the longest time and has not regretted a single moment.

In a 2014 interview, Ochi shared a message she has always tried to convey:



“Do not let anyone define who you are. No. Or limit your aspirations. Never.”