In 2001 I was searching for classmates for my fiftieth high-school reunion. One of those long lost friends was a Japanese American girl, Ellen Yukawa, who had come to our junior high in 1945 soon after World War II. We had no idea where she had spent the war—nor where she might be now.

For some reason it became my personal mission to find Ellen. I started searching online and found myself on the Web site of the Japanese American National Museum (JANM) in Los Angeles. I know it was fate, because it was there that I found the story of Clara Breed, a children's librarian in San Diego, who in 1942 was outraged when the orders came that her young Japanese American patrons were to be imprisoned, though they were guilty of nothing but looking like the enemy.

Clara felt she had to do something for "her children," as she called them. On the day of their departure, not knowing where they were to be taken, Clara went to the train station and gave out stamped, self-addressed postcards, telling her young friends to write.

And write they did! During the next three years they wrote more than 200 letters that began with the words Dear Miss Breed. Indeed, Clara became their lifeline, sending them books and hope. Fortunately, like the good librarian she was, she saved all of their letters, which are now held by the JANM. The more I read those letters, the more I knew that I had to write a book about them. I knew the story had to be told in the words of those who lived it. I had to find Miss Breed's children and interview them personally.

Fortunately, I was able to track down many of the correspondents—and my classmate, who by coincidence had been imprisoned in the same camp as Miss Breed's children. I spent a year preparing for those interviews, immersing myself in the history of the incarceration. It was not a story told during my school years, nor even today. (A current advanced placement history guide gives it two paragraphs.) I needed to understand the history of racism and fear that led to the tragedy of imprisoning 120,000 men, women, and children whose only crime was having the "wrong" ancestors. I needed to know how this could have happened in America.

Soon after starting my research, something else happened in America. On 9/11, from my office windows, I saw the Twin Towers fall, and my worst childhood fears came true. America was being bombed. Suddenly those who looked like the hijackers were fair game for attack. The war hysteria and racial profiling that followed 9/11 had an all-too-familiar ring. Dear Miss Breed was a story with new relevance.

The question was how to present this story to young people who might not even know about Pearl Harbor—nor understand what it was like to be an Asian American on the West Coast in the 1940s. I had to put the letters to Clara Breed in context, telling the story of decades of racism that had led to exclusionary laws preventing Asian immigrants from becoming citizens, from owning land, and from being allowed to live the American Dream.

My research took me to archives where I found diaries, letters, school essays, and camp records with the "voices" of others who lived through the incarceration. I also read the heart-wrenching testimony of those who recalled their imprisonment during the 1981 congressional redress hearings. They repeated one message—that this story be told to future generations so that such a travesty will never happen again.

Armed with a fuller background, I began to see what the letters to Miss Breed did not say. The children's correspondence often seemed unnatural—cheerful and put a brave and patriotic face on their lives behind barbed wire. It was as if Miss Breed's young friends wanted to protect her from
the awful truth or the shame of their circumstances. When I eventually interviewed the correspondents they explained that it was a cultural thing. The English call it a "stiff upper lip." In Japanese, they say shikataganai—some things cannot be helped—no point in complaining. More than 60 years later, they are still not complaining; but through interviewing them I heard many stories that are not in the letters. Margaret Ishino's letters, written when she was 17, did not tell how she made a crib for her baby brother in a feeding trough, nor about FBI agents who searched their home and, thinking her mother was hiding something, pulled the bed covers off her, even though she had just given birth.

Unlike a history textbook, Dear Miss Breed uses primary materials, giving readers a human connection. It is one thing to say in a textbook that "in April 1942 the largest mass migration of a single people began," but it is another thing to read actual accounts of the event from those who lived through it. Dear Miss Breed is not just a story about Japanese Americans—it is about all of us. It is a story of friendship and courage. It is also a cautionary tale about events that can happen all too easily when people are willing to ignore the law and act on racism and hysteria.

History books are usually about famous people—generals, kings, and tyrants. Clara Breed was none of these things. She never earned a medal for bravery in action. Yet she fought injustice through the power of words, speaking out in articles for Horn Book and Library Journal. She sent discarded books to the camps and urged others to do the same. She wrote to the government, affirming the loyalty of some of her children's fathers who were in federal prisons. With her limited salary, she sent gifts of books, toys, clothes, and whatever her young friends requested.

In small but constant acts of kindness, Clara reassured her children that they were not forgotten. She acted with courage and determination while many of our leaders allowed hate and fear to govern. Clara Breed's story speaks to the idea that one person can make a difference in the lives of many people—to me she is truly an American hero.

Just days before the book was to go to press I had one last surprise. Surely it was fate again! Until that week no letter from Miss Breed to her children was known to have survived. But that week—when the manuscript was about to be shipped off to the printer—I received a call from the niece of Tets Hirasaki, one of Miss Breed's dearest, telling me that he had passed away. As we spoke I asked if by any chance among her uncle's papers she had found any letters from Miss Breed. A few days later a letter from Miss Breed to Tets arrived—and we managed to reproduce it on the last page of the book. And what a letter it is! I believe it says more about Clara Breed than any words I could find.

**Sampling Oppenheim**


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A stirring letter from Clara Breed to a young boy facing relocation appears on the final page of Joanne Oppenheim's Dear Miss Breed.