

Conferral of Degrees to Japanese-Canadian Students (Class of '41/42)

Professor Stephen J. Toope, President and Vice-Chancellor

30 May 2012, 3:45-5:30 p.m.

On the truly momentous days of our lives, most of us experience a kaleidoscope of thoughts and emotions. This is one such day. As UBC formally welcomes the 76 Japanese Canadian students of 1942 into our alumni family, the emotions I feel most deeply are a profound gratitude to the students and their families, and joy over this homecoming.

That joy is tinged with sadness, because many are no longer with us. Let me tell you about one such person. Kiichi George Noguchi, born in 1919, was part of a hardworking Vancouver family. From 1937 to 1942 he studied chemistry at UBC with a dream of becoming a doctor.

Mr. Noguchi's ability to attend his graduation, and pursue his dream, was shattered in 1942. Yet he pushed on. He was interned at Christina Lake and in the Slocan Valley. He married, worked hard, and eventually rose to the level of Vice President of Aerosol

Packaging, and then President of his own company. Mr. Noguchi passed away just two months ago.

I must add, we have learned that another student who was planning to attend, James Hajime Hasegawa, passed away just a few days ago on May 17. My heartfelt condolences go to these families.

The story of Mr. Noguchi epitomizes the legacy of these students: human decency can triumph over ignorance.

Today, I want to honour the memory of Mr. Noguchi and Mr. Hasegawa, and all of these students, by acknowledging UBC's part in this dark episode. At the time, too few in our community stood up in your defense.

And this is what makes those who did, stand out all the more. Henry Angus, and E.H. Morrow were among those who spoke up, and provided support to students. I am so pleased some of their family members are with us today.

Seventy years later, these Japanese Canadian students of 1942 gained a new advocate: Mary Kitigawa. Mary, we are indebted to you for your persistence. We hope the actions we are taking – to learn from our mistakes by preserving the historical record, and to develop educational initiatives for future students – provides an enduring, meaningful response.

To each of you students and your representatives, by accepting these degrees, you offer us a true gift of grace. It is a gift that awakens the best of human nature in all of us. Thank you.