



Whittier Union

HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT

To Achieve and Maintain Excellence...

NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: March 13, 2024 **CONTACT:** Andrea Garcia **PHONE:** 909-447-2403

Whittier Union Board Approves Building Dedication for Former Art Teacher, WWII Hero

WHITTIER – Longtime Whittier resident Yoshio Nakamura discovered his love of art while stationed in Italy as a member of the legendary 442nd Regimental Combat Team during World War II. Immersing himself in the works of Michelangelo, Da Vinci and Raphael, Nakamura began to lay the foundation for a lifelong career as an artist and teacher – a career that got its start when Nakamura was hired as a teacher at Whittier High School in 1952.

Acknowledging Nakamura’s contributions as a teacher and his commitment to art education, the Whittier Union Board of Trustees voted unanimously on March 12 to dedicate the Whittier High School Fine Arts building in his honor. This honor celebrates the man who shook off the adversity of being interned with his family in WWII to become a highly decorated war hero and beloved teacher and administrator at Whittier High and, later, as Río Hondo College’s first art professor.

“This is unbelievable, and I consider it an honor for the 442nd,” Nakamura said. “It was really a joy to be teaching, I enjoyed working with the students. I received great support from my superintendent, and my colleagues provided a very good environment for learning. I hope having a building dedicated could be an inspiration for others to enter the teaching profession.”

Whittier Union Board President Gary Mendez is a former Governing Board Member for Río Hondo College, as well as a longtime student and friend of Nakamura. Mr. Nakamura, Mendez’s Dean at Río Hondo, always welcomed conversations with Mendez as a student leader. Mendez has been searching for a way to honor Nakamura’s contributions to the District, and brought the proposal to the Board for consideration.

Now 98-years old, Nakamura, known to everyone as “Yosh,” is a Southern California native who attended schools in Rosemead and El Monte before WWII upended his life and forced him into internment camps with his father and siblings. In 1944, Nakamura enlisted in the Army, where he worked as a mortar specialist with the 442nd, an infantry regiment consisting almost entirely of American soldiers of Japanese ancestry, known as “Nisei.”

The 442nd is the most decorated unit for its size and length of service in U.S. military history, with all members, living or dead, receiving the Congressional Gold Medal in 2011. Nakamura is also the recipient of a Bronze Star and the French Foreign Legion medal.

After using his GI Bill to earn a bachelor’s degree in fine arts at USC, Nakamura was hired at Whittier High, where he quickly established himself as a teacher willing to give his students the freedom to express themselves creatively and became one of the school’s most popular teachers.

– MORE –

In an era when individual awards for teachers were rare, Nakamura was named the Whittier Women's Club 1960 teacher of the year.

Nakamura's artistic legacy can be seen through the lens of his former students, many of whom went on to work professionally, including Academy Award-winning visual effects artist Lorne Petersen, Rose Parade float designer Raul Rodriguez, graphic designer Don Strout, glass artist Trish Duggan and Amy Yutani, who helped co-design the Seattle Seahawks logo for the National Football League.

In 1963, Nakamura left Whittier High to join the recently opened Río Hondo College as its first professor. Nakamura would spend nearly 30 years at the College and served as an art professor, dean and vice president of community services and institutional development.

Since retirement, Nakamura has stayed active in the Whittier art community, volunteering for Whittier's Art in Public Places Committee and Cultural Arts Commission. In October 2023, the Whittier Art Gallery staged a career retrospective, "Yoshio Nakamura: 75 Years of Artistry." Nakamura donated half of his sales from the exhibit, totaling \$17,000, to the Gallery.

Nakamura has also been closely involved with the [Go For Broke](#) program, which honors the legacy of the 442nd Combat Team. In 2015, Nakamura was one of several WWII veterans and second-generation Nisei soldiers who joined the City of Alhambra's "Go For Broke" Rose Parade float, which included 21 floral portraits of Congressional Honor Roll recipients. A portrait of Nakamura is included in the "Go For Broke Spirit: Legacy in Portraits" exhibition at the National WWII Museum in New Orleans, currently on view until March 31.

Nakamura was married for nearly 67 years to his wife, Grace, who was also an artist and educator as well as a well-known community activist, until her death in 2017. Yosh and Grace had three children: Joel, a Santa Fe-based professional artist who contributed art for the 2002 Winter Olympics opening and closing ceremonies; Daniel, an origami artist and recently retired science teacher; and Linda, an immigration naturalization lawyer and photographer.

"What a historic moment for Whittier Union," Mendez said. "Mr. Nakamura has contributed immensely to this nation, our Whittier community, and, above all, has left a lasting impact on the lives of students. Mr. Nakamura's name and story will live on in Whittier Union. It is a privilege to endorse the naming of a building after him, recognizing his truly remarkable and impactful achievements."

PHOTO CAPTION

WUHSD_NAKAMURA1: From left to right: Whittier Union Board Member Dr. Russell Castañeda-Calleros, Board Member Jaime López, Vice President Josefina E. Canchola, Clerk Irma Rodríguez Moisa, President Gary Mendez and Yoshio Nakamura (center) celebrate the unanimous vote to name the Whittier High School Fine Arts building in Nakamura's honor during a Board meeting on March 12.

OUR MISSION:

The Whittier Union High School District provides all students with an engaging, quality standards-based instructional program delivered by a well-trained staff resulting in improved student achievement. Whittier Union High School District works to achieve and maintain excellence in providing a comprehensive education for all students.

BOARD OF TRUSTEES:

Gary Mendez
President

Josefina E. Canchola
Vice President

Irma Rodríguez Moisa
Clerk

Dr. Russell Castañeda-Calleros
Member

Jaime López
Member

Dr. Monica Oviedo
Superintendent