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Let's Talk Story Club: A Promise to Remember



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Let's Talk Story Club Co-founders Taisho Shiono and Audrey Shiono with the late Nisei World War II veteran and *Let's Talk Story* artist Ben Suechika at his senior home in Torrance, California. Photo courtesy of Let's Talk Story Club.

"My favorite part is learning about how someone really finds an impact in filling out the story book with their senior," Taisho Shiono, co-founder of Let's Talk Story Club, says when reflecting on what he enjoys most about his work in the nonprofit.

Started in memory of their Obaachama, or great-grandmother, sister and brother duo Audrey and Taisho Shiono founded Let's Talk Story Club to preserve the life histories of seniors through the style of "talking story." Since the official launch of the *Let's Talk Story* book in March 2023, the nonprofit has built meaningful bonds across generations, leading to the documentation of over 350 seniors' lives.

"The *Let's Talk Story* book is so important to us because it's not just writing down answers inside of a book," Audrey says. "It's just the starting point to learning about so much more about your culture that you might not have known."

Culture and Roots

From its conception, Let's Talk Story Club has maintained a deep appreciation for culture and history. Growing up as fifth-generation Japanese Americans, Audrey and Taisho attended Japanese language school as a way to remain connected with their heritage even as they struggled with generational divides. "We're around our Japanese culture, but at the same time we felt sort of disconnected from it," Audrey explains. Nevertheless, the siblings did their best to embed their culture into their daily lives. They learned the Japanese language and partook in memorable traditions such as celebrating Oshogatsu, or Japanese New Year, at their grandparents' house.

As they grew older, Audrey and Taisho became increasingly aware of the lives and histories that made up their cultural identities. "There were a lot of things ... we weren't quite aware about our family," Taisho explains. "One of those things included the internment camps."

At the heart of Let's Talk Story Club is the memory of the siblings' Obaachama. When she was 104, Obaachama was admitted to a senior home where she faced a difficult transition. "The only time she would ever liven up is when she would 'talk story,' how they say in Hawai'i," Taisho reflects. From funny stories about rattlesnake encounters

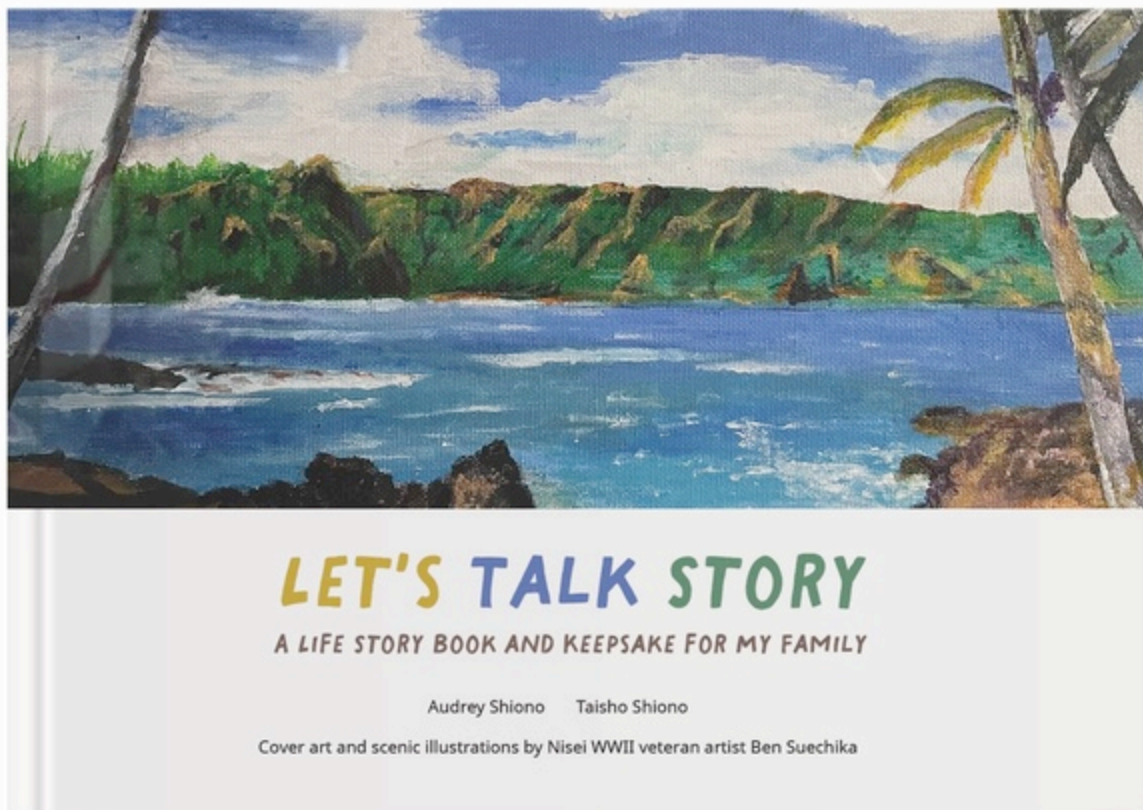
to serious topics including her incarceration at Tule Lake, Obaachama's memories continue to lay the foundation for Let's Talk Story Club. "Those are all things that we wish we had preserved," Taisho says. "That's what initially inspired us to write the *Let's Talk Story* book, which is the memory book with prompts to fill in the life stories of seniors."

Let's Talk Story Club

The result was the demanding but rewarding journey of founding Let's Talk Story Club, an organization that has come to symbolize more than memory books by valuing the lived experiences of the older generation. Working on the concept since 2020, Audrey and Taisho dedicated countless hours to creating their book and establishing the nonprofit. In March 2023, their hard efforts paid off when they officially launched the *Let's Talk Story* book, complete with one hundred insightful prompts to inspire meaningful conversations with seniors.

After the tremendous accomplishment of completing the book, the siblings immediately began working on outreach into the community, pairing volunteers with seniors to begin filling the books' beautiful pages with recollections. In particular, Let's Talk Story Club has hosted community workshops, occasionally in collaboration with senior homes, to hold a space for seniors to connect with and complete memory books with volunteers.

Another mode of outreach for the nonprofit has been through the South High AP Japanese Class. "We implemented in the curriculum our *Let's Talk Story* book," Audrey explains. "These students will then fill out these story books with their families and their grandparents ... which has been very impactful and positive."



The *Let's Talk Story* book is available for purchase on the Go For Broke National Education Center's [online store](#) for \$25.00. 100% of profits are donated back to GFBNEC.

As the final method, Let's Talk Story Club has made it possible for any volunteer who wishes to preserve a life history to order the book online and fill it out independently. Through these different methods, Let's Talk Story Club has collected countless oral histories while spreading the joy of human connection.

In addition to its emphasis on building interpersonal bonds, the *Let's Talk Story* book also has a medical application. "We have culturally specific prompts, like your favorite Oshogatsu [New Year's] memory," Taisho says. "The reason for that is there's research that culturally specific memories help seniors recollect better." However, the process of "talking story" does so much more than counter memory loss. By addressing fun topics like childhood stories and favorite foods, the memory book creates moments of joy for both seniors and volunteers.

"It keeps the minds engaged. It promotes self-esteem and self-worth. It offers companionship, and that's just so important to all aspects of health care," Audrey explains.

Most importantly, the *Let's Talk Story* book creates a safe space for seniors to discuss serious and often painful topics, such as their experiences living through historical challenges. Nisei World War II veteran Ben Suechika was the first senior who filled out the *Let's Talk Story* book. As the artist responsible for the beautiful paintings and illustrations on the book's cover and within its pages, his work has touched the lives of the over 350 seniors whose stories have now been preserved.

"We were inspired by him because he was a Nisei World War veteran, first of all, and also because he was in the Gila River Internment Camp, and he had experience in the Military Intelligence Service," Audrey says. "If you met him, he was one of the happiest, most positive people you'll ever meet." Sadly, Ben Suechika passed away a few months ago. The moments that Audrey and Taisho spent with him are ones they deeply treasure in their memories. When asked about their favorite stories, Audrey and Taisho recalled their experience of filling out the memory book with him.

"As we were talking about his life, by the end of it, he closed the cover again. He pointed at the front. He's like, 'Oh, wait, I painted that,'" Taisho reflects. "That was just an awesome moment."

Go For Broke National Education Center

Acknowledging a painful history rooted in legalized discrimination by the U.S. government, Let's Talk Story Club has become a new way for the younger generation to acknowledge the voices of those who lived during Japanese American incarceration.¹ Advocating for the future, the nonprofit collaborates with the [Go For Broke National Education Center](#) (GFBNEC) to contribute to the fight for equality in the memory of World War II veterans of Japanese descent.

Currently, the *Let's Talk Story* book is sold through the GFBNEC, and 100% of profits are given back to Go For Broke and its mission. By working to preserve the lived experiences of Japanese American incarceration, Let's Talk Story Club honors the resilience of the older generation and carries their histories as injustices that should never be forgotten. "With each story that comes back about a senior that we helped, that their family learned about their internment camp experience or their ... family learned something just new about the senior [or they] just got to spend time with them," Taisho says. "It made it ... all the more worth it to keep going."



Audrey Shiono, Co-Founder and President of the Let's Talk Story Club, presents a \$1,000 check to Mitchell T. Maki, President and CEO of the Go For Broke National Education Center (GFBNEC), in support of public education on Japanese American WWII veterans. Funds were raised at the *Let's Talk Story* book sale at Project Kokoro's Kazoku-No-Hi "Ohana" Family Day. Photo courtesy of Let's Talk Story Club.

Remembering for the Future

Today, Let's Talk Story Club has impacted over 350 seniors' lives. With a wide network of volunteers ranging from the South High AP Japanese Class to Girl Scout members, the organization's impact continues to grow through the memory books distributed and the oral histories preserved.

One of the most meaningful moments for Audrey and Taisho has been watching their hard work come to fruition at the community workshop they hosted at the Gardena Valley Japanese Cultural Institute (JCI). "We really saw for the first time, in front of our own eyes, so many seniors and volunteers and their own families just were talking for two hours straight, 'talking story,'" Taisho reflects. "It really ... brought out the spirit of Let's Talk Story, and that made us really proud."

Even despite their incredible achievements through their nonprofit, Audrey and Taisho are still looking to expand their impact. "We obviously feel very proud of what

we've done so far, but honestly, I feel like I want to continue to impact many more people and continue to grow as much as I can," Audrey says.

Looking toward the future, Let's Talk Story Club is hosting a family history workshop as part of [Discover Nikkei Fest](#), a celebration of Discover Nikkei's 20th anniversary. On February 8, 2025 at the Japanese American National Museum (JANM), the festival will celebrate the project with a multitude of activities, including a chance to preserve senior memories with Audrey and Taisho through "talking story."

For the founders, their future plans continue to be both wide-ranging and impactful. Audrey has been working hard to organize the Women in Kendo demonstration at the 2025 Oshogatsu Family Festival. "I'm [going to] be highlighting ... women inside kendo and their strength and resilience in a male dominated field," she explains. On a personal level, she is interested in leadership, biomedical research, and health care particularly for underrepresented minorities. "I feel like that connects really well with what we're doing right now with Japanese Americans," she reflects.



Let's Talk Story Club hosted a community event where students from the AP Japanese Class at South High School in Torrance, California, completed memory books with seniors of Japanese ancestry. As part of their coursework, the students continue to practice their Japanese language

skills by completing Let's Talk Story books with grandparents. Photo courtesy of Let's Talk Story Club.

For Taisho, as a premedical student at Stanford University, he is also looking to impact the medical field as a doctor with an interest in representing minorities in healthcare. He is currently looking toward opportunities of expansion for the nonprofit. "There's [going to] be so many opportunities for me to possibly spread Let's Talk Story up to Northern California," he explains.

While acknowledging the many possibilities ahead of these two young individuals, it is also important to recognize how far Let's Talk Story Club has come since the concept first started in 2020. At its heart, the organization has maintained an appreciation for telling stories. "Whether it just be mundane things about their high school experiences, or very serious things like internment camps, it's important to understand what [y]our family has gone through in order to be connected with your ... Japanese American ancestry," Taisho explains. That is why for Taisho, what he enjoys most about the nonprofit has been hearing the impact the memories brought by the *Let's Talk Story* book have had in someone's life. "Those are stories that when I hear them come back, that's my favorite part," he reflects.

For Audrey, the *Let's Talk Story* book serves as an opportunity for the younger generation to remain connected to their elders. "My favorite part is definitely bridging the intergenerational gap that there is between grandparents and grandchildren in today's society," she explains. "Many times, especially with technology and the just very different cultural values between grandparents and grandchildren, there's often a disconnect." The approach of "talking story" has been both a sentimental and meaningful method to combat generational divides.

"Our *Let's Talk Story* book [is] just extremely powerful because it ... overcomes these barriers of misunderstanding," Audrey says. "My favorite part has definitely been seeing not only young children with grandparents, but even teenagers with grandparents, just be able to bond and sit together and enjoy this moment together."

Even so, Let's Talk Story Club has its challenges when attempting to recapture stories from the older generation. "There's first of all, still the language barrier," Taisho explains. "And aside from that, a lot of times the older generation, they don't like talking about their past, especially if they lived in internment camps. I think that's just

the culture of the generation of Japanese Americans.” Nevertheless, Let’s Talk Story Club persists in preserving these histories with the sensitivity and respect they are due. “That’s why even slowly working at it, just through talking, is so important,” Taisho reflects.

Community has always been important to Let’s Talk Story Club, and the nonprofit’s work is not one that can be left to its founders alone. “We really encourage everybody who’s interested to at least take a look at the website,” Taisho says. Anyone considering joining the Let’s Talk Story Club community or learning more about the organization, they can visit the nonprofit’s [website](#) to learn more.

Most importantly, Let’s Talk Story Club remains a spark of hope for the future. Through Audrey and Taisho’s tireless efforts, the organization has forged a commitment from today’s youth to remember and give back to the older generation. During an age dominated by smartphones and social media, these storybooks serve as reminders for the younger generation to acknowledge the human voices behind history. “What we want the senior to personally gain is ... less of a sense of loneliness and more of a realization that they’re important, their stories are heard,” Audrey explains. Most of all, Let’s Talk Story Club continues to be a promise from the future to the past.

“[We], the future generation, are ... willing to listen to them. We hear their stories, we hear their struggle, and we want to preserve it and keep it alive forever,” she says.

Notes

1. Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History* (Simon & Schuster: 2015), 229, 235.

Interviewees’ quotes have been edited for clarity.

* * * * *

*Join Let’s Talk Story Club at **JANM on February 8, 2025** for a guided workshop on Senior Memory Collection as part of Discover Nikkei Fest. Discover Nikkei Fest kicks off Discover Nikkei’s twentieth anniversary with a full day of activities including a Community Fair,*

Family Stories Workshops, International Nikkei Family Stories Panel Discussion (in-person and virtual), and Reception. [Get tickets here.](#)

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books

California

Discover Nikkei Fest (event)

Discover Nikkei programs (event)

Go For Broke National Education Center

Let's Talk Story Club

library materials

life interviews

Little Tokyo

Los Angeles

memory

older people

oral histories

publications

United States

About the Author



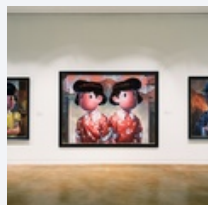
Kayla Kamei

@Kayla



Kayla Kamei is an undergraduate student at UCLA majoring in English. As a Sansei, she is interested in exploring how she can use her writing to communicate the different stories and lives of others in her community. She not only hopes to understand more about her Japanese culture from their perspectives but also hopes to bring greater awareness to their experiences.

Updated August 2024



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Yoskay Yamamoto: The Sky
Is the Limit



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NIKKEI NAMES 2



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