

## SIUE alumnus molded by early experiences

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Though SIUE alumnus Arthur Towata was born an American citizen in Los Angeles, at 8 years old, he, his mother and 2-year-old brother were imprisoned in the Manzanar War Relocation Center after Imperial Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor.

Towata, an Alton resident, potter and art professor, told nearly 70 students in the Interdisciplinary Studies class "The Atomic Era: Hitler, the Holocaust, and the Bomb" the story of his life Thursday, Oct. 10.

During World War II, approximately 100,000 Americans of Japanese descent were relocated to internment camps due to fears that they would undermine the war effort.

The camp Towata was taken to remains in eastern California in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, with harsh winds bringing dust into the barracks every morning, extreme temperatures in both the summer and winter and sparse vegetation.

Prior to the start of the war, Towata's father was taken by the United States Justice Department because he was the treasurer of the Japanese school system on the West Coast.

"It was early morning, and there were lights all over the house, all around it, just motorcycle lights," Towata said. "My father was very well known by the police, FBI and so forth, and a guy came up and told my father, 'You know why we're here. Sorry to do this, but we have to take you away.'"

That was the last time Towata saw his father. Towata said, in the camp, one of the guards shot his father. The Red Cross, though, told his mother that his father had died of a brain condition.

Most families were given two or three days to prepare to move to the camps, but because his mother belonged to a United Methodist Church, Towata's family was given two weeks. His family was only able to take the clothes they wore and whatever they could carry on the train to the camp.

Towata said he wore as many layers as he could. They tried to sell their remaining belongings, but Americans did not want to buy from anyone who was Japanese. They ended up selling his father's car for \$5.

Gatherings of six or more adults were not allowed in the camp. The guards frequently fired their guns at the camp's barbed wire fence border to discourage escape attempts.

Towata said the food the U.S. government provided was pretty unsavory. Some of the usual food included hot dogs burnt on the outside but raw on the inside and brown cabbage mixed with rice.

Multiple families shared a single barrack together. Towata's family roomed with his aunt's family and hung a bed sheet down the middle of the room for privacy. The walls were covered with black tar paper, the smell of which Towata said he can still remember. An uncovered light bulb hung from the ceiling.

Though the conditions at the camp were harsh, Towata was able to take his experiences in a positive direction: his pottery. His rough-hewn, earth-encrusted pots resemble the terrain at the camp, though it took Towata 60 years to realize it when he returned in 2006.

"I did not want to visit the camp," Towata said, "but my better half bought the tickets and everything, and she said, 'We have to go there.' And I'm glad I did because all the things I make, my colleagues would say, 'Are you still making those cruddy pots?' Those cruddy pots are the environment in which I grew up as a kid."

Towata was one of two boys in the camp who were allowed to take a bus to a public school nearby, though his younger brother was not able to go. At school one day, students were carrying American flags to put in a centerpiece.

"It was my turn," Towata said, "and I was carrying the flag in there, and the teacher smacked it out of my hand. She said, 'You don't have the right to carry the flag.'"

Towata's later education improved. He was part of the first group of students to attend what would become SIUE with help from the G.I. Bill, graduating with a Bachelor of Science in 1962.

He later earned a Master of Fine Arts and Master of Education in 1971 at SIUE. Towata said the campus has changed a great deal since he first attended classes.

"I graduated at the corn field," Towata said.

Foreign language and literature professor Belinda Carstens-Wickham teaches alongside physics professor Tom Foster the interdisciplinary studies class to which Towata spoke. Carstens-Wickham said she first had the idea to bring Towata to her class after reading about his visit to a World History class at Edwardsville High School in the Edwardsville Intelligencer.

Though her class focuses on the scientific development of the atomic bomb and the rise of Nazi Germany, Carstens-Wickham said she felt Towata's experiences were relevant to the class's content.

"[In the class] we talk about concentration camps in Germany and Poland. We always point the finger at the other side, when actually we were doing something quite similar. The only difference was ours were not extermination camps. But everything was taken away from the Japanese, just like everything was taken away from the Jews," Carstens-Wickham said. "Maybe we need to look at ourselves a little more critically."

After leaving the camp in 1944, Towata and his family had lost almost all their possessions, so they went to Japan to build a new life.

Though he was able to attend school and work as an interpreter for the U.S. Military, he could not completely assimilate into Japanese culture. Some called him “blue eyes,” which is a term used for foreigners in Japan.

Towata returned to America after 10 years in Japan and joined the Air Force, stationed at Scott Air Force Base. Towata said it was never a question of whether he would fight for his country.

“I have always thought of myself as an American,” Towata said. “The Japanese who fought for their country — that was the only home they ever knew.”