

Centennial Conversations

~ interview by Anina Minotto and Whit Hayslip

Meet Shizuko Akasaki



The journey that brought Shizuko (Shizzie) Akasaki to All Saints Church began with her father – who she says, “always looked at the ocean from his native Japan knowing that the United States was his destination.” After attending college in San Francisco and starting an import/export gift store in Long Beach, he returned to Japan, met her mother and settled in to raise their family in America.

World War II and the unconscionable detention of Japanese-Americans had a chilling impact on the family’s best-laid plans. Shizzie and her family were sent to three different internment camps: Santa Anita, CA, Jerome, AK and Gila River, AZ. She recalls hearing the war was over on a radio at the age of nine -- and watching the tower guards leave their post right after the announcement. Her father organized a bus to take his family and several other families from Arizona to California. After several temporary living quarters, the Akasaki family settled in Boyle Heights in East Los Angeles.

That new life included attending a variety of churches. Shizzie attended Utah Street Elementary, Hollenbeck Junior and Roosevelt High School, and wanting to work with people, Shizzie became a teacher and principal -- eventually working in various administrative positions. She was Assistant Superintendent of ESEA Title One Programs, Administrative Coordinator of Early Childhood Programs, and Early Childhood Special Education Programs.

All the while, Shizzie kept looking into different faiths – including Self-Realization and Buddhism – but nothing really moved her. She says “they were all either too basic, too fundamental, and somewhat boring. Then, All Saints Church

came into my life because of an invitation by my friend Whit Hayslip.”

Initially Shizzie volunteered at the Welcome Coffee meeting newcomers, learning more about the Episcopal Church and enjoying the connection and conversation with others. Eventually her gifts for leadership skills were deployed in a variety of ways, including two terms on the Vestry and working with Greg Adams to lead a Strategic Plan initiative in the 90s. In addition to her administrative gifts, she brought her love of working with people to her work in pastoral care.

Shizzie retired eight years ago at the age of 80. She worked part time in the later years. In retirement, she enjoys keeping up with her physical fitness program with yoga, tai chi, qi qong. She volunteers with Pasadena Village, Sage and Seeker Program, and as a Gamble House Docent – where she encountered a former student in her tour group who thanked her for her impact on his life. “You taught me how to think,” he said. “When I asked you a question, you always replied with a question.”

Questioning. Leading. Pastoring. Decades of Shizzie offering her gifts to All Saints Church have immeasurably enriched its work and witness -- and we are so grateful for the journey that led her here and has kept her here.

In our interview with Shizzie, we asked her to respond to these three questions:

What is the one thing you’re most grateful for about All Saints Church?

The openness and willingness to figure things out together. I always appreciated the dialogue that developed and particularly being part of strategizing in our vestry meetings. George, would say, “What’s great about you, Shizzie, is that you ask so many questions.” Listening to George Regas’ sermon at my first visit to All Saints Church, “It was so enlightening!”

Tell us a story of a favorite memory of your years at All Saints.

In the mid-1980’s, Whit invited me to Homecoming. I had never been to an Episcopal Church and the liturgy was new to me. At the Eucharist, I heard the invitation, “whoever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome at the table.” The Spirit moved me, and I found my feet were taking me to the communion rail -- where I was overwhelmed with deep joy. This was an important point in my spiritual journey and the memory is still vivid to this day.

What is your greatest hope for All Saints Church as move into this next century here at 132 N Euclid Ave?

That All Saints will always have a hopeful message in the midst of difficult challenges – and will continue to offer strong leadership that will sustain the message of our church into the future.