

Elizabeth Min, It took a war to bring my family together, Grade 10 (Decatur High School – Federal Way)

It took a war to bring my family together.

Growing up, I never felt close to my brothers. Older brother and I were nine years apart, and there was no chance that Renji, eleven years younger than me, could be a real sibling to older brother.

Though my brothers and I were born in America, we were taken to the Camp Harmony internment camp in April of 1942 because we were Japanese. Perhaps it was because of my fear of the war that Camp Harmony seemed so idyllic. There, life simulated normalcy.

It was at Camp Harmony that I got to spend time with my family, something we never did at home. It was at Camp Harmony that I got my first job, and older brother addressed me directly for the first time. It was a dream. My family was my own and for the first time, I wasn't scared of the war.

Although some memories are hazy, one remains clear. Older brother asked me if I was happy.

"You aren't?"

He stared at the dishes we had to clean. "Back home, I was a disappointment. Some days, I feel even worse. Others, I think this is where I belong... Asuna, you're stronger than I thought. Thank you for helping me here."

There was something about older brother thanking me that made a rock settle in my stomach, so when he finished and told me to turn the lights out when I left, all I said was "okay," and I let him leave.

Older brother killed himself that night.

Renji wasn't far behind.

He'd always been a sickly child, but when our family and hundreds of others were transferred to Minidoka internment camp, Renji didn't even have energy to complain. We wanted to stay and let Renji rest, but the person in charge insisted that we would be fine. He loaded us onto the train I would emerge from 30 hours later, brotherless and empty and so full I couldn't breathe.

In 1943, my family went home. I thought that, even though we were coming to nothing, home would change something in my shells of parents. I was wrong; they never recovered.

But I did.

I guess I've run out of shame, because it's almost seventy years after the war, and I can admit that Camp Harmony was the site of my best memories.

Even though there are many things I still don't understand, I know enough to fill the blanks on Renji's sickness and older brother's suicide. I know myself enough to know that without Camp Harmony, I wouldn't be the person I am today, a well-regarded youth psychiatrist that has talked more than one kid off the brink.

Just like every teen I've worked with, even though I didn't want to be talked into living, therapy was something I had to go through. World War II was the treatment I needed to convince me that life goes on. Once the war ended, I wanted to live.