



Dr. Gordon Sato with some of the Eritreans he has helped through his Manzanar Project.

A Love of Science Breeds a Life of Humanity

Dr. Gordon Sato has invented a pioneering cancer drug, but much of his life has been dedicated to helping the people of Africa through his Manzanar Project.

By Caroline Aoyagi-Stom, Executive Editor
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Ever since he was a child, Dr. Gordon Sato has loved science. He's always believed that science could be used to help people all over the world.

It's a belief he carried with him to the Manzanar Internment Camp, a desolate area near California's Death Valley where he spent two of his teenage years.

At the age of 80 today, Sato is a world-renowned cellular biologist, an inventor of the cancer drug Erbitux. He's also single-handedly helping the impoverished African peoples of Eritrea and Mauritania through his aptly named Manzanar Project.

"Since I was a child I loved science and I envisioned science would help poor people, and it can," said Sato from his home just north of Boston. "In Manzanar I thought about the desert a lot so when I was in Africa I thought about the desert ... it came from my experiences at Manzanar."

What came to Sato was a simple, yet revolutionary idea. He had been in Eritrea during the Ethiopian famine. Shortly after the war ended, he was driving along the African coast when he noticed some thriving mangrove trees amidst a barren desert landscape.

The blossoming trees were near freshwater that emptied out into the Red Sea. He soon discovered that if three things - nitrogen, phosphorous and iron - were injected into seawater, mangroves and other plants could grow.

There are now over a million mangrove trees near the Eritrean town of Hergigo, a place with about 3,000 people. Sato and his staff of about 50 Eritreans have also helped to breed thousands of goats and sheep that feed on the mangroves. A diet of these trees with some fishmeal enables the sheep and goats to produce milk for their litters, another one of Sato's discoveries.

Today, this small Eritrean town is thriving, all due to Sato's efforts and discoveries.

"My impression of Africa is that when I look and see people who are poor and starving it is because of mismanagement, corruption and lack of thought," he said. "There is no reason for them to be poor and hungry. We've solved how to make the deserts of the world grow things with seawater."

An Idea is Born

Grace Nakamura isn't shy about her admiration for her childhood friend. She often uses the same adjectives to describe Sato: "brilliant" and "visionary" are used quite a bit.

But most of all, she says, "He's a really good person."

Their mothers were longtime friends so it was natural that Nakamura and Sato developed a close bond during their childhood in Southern California. They were even in the same block, Block 29, during their time at Manzanar.

In camp, Nakamura recalls Sato talking about his vision to help people through his love of science.

He wanted to show "that we were people with dignity, with self-worth, and someday he would do something to prove this," she said. "He had a vision. He helps people anywhere in the world."

Like Nakamura, many former Manzanar internees have given generously to the Manzanar Project, a project that also helps to pass on the lessons of life behind barbwire.

"When I talk to people I see a generation gap," Sato said. "Internees who have seen the hardship of camp can sympathize with what I'm trying to do. The young people who haven't experienced it, not as much."

Even at 80, Sato isn't slowing down. He still travels all around the world on speaking engagements and he plans to head to Mauritania next month where he recently brought the Manzanar Project.

With a current staff of five people, several mangrove trees and grasses are being planted to help the Mauritians. Unlike Eritrea, the mangroves this time will be planted inland with seawater pumped in from the Atlantic Ocean, a project that required new draining techniques to avoid seawater buildup.

Sato hopes the project will be as successful as Eritrea.

One factor in his favor is the support of the Mauritanian government, something he still does not have in Eritrea. According to Sato, the Eritrean government's past support of Al Qaeda and Sudan has prevented him from seeking funding from the United Nations or the U.S. government.

That's why Sato has embarked on an aggressive fundraising campaign in hopes of raising much needed monies to continue operating the Manzanar Project.

"Science is easy but politics and culture are difficult. This was a big disappointment for me," said Sato, who has personally used hundreds of thousands of dollars of his own money to fund the project.

"He really needs help on this project to proliferate it," Nakamura said. "We need to get the younger people involved, to have an ownership in this thing."

The Next Generation

Nathan Sato, 51, admits that when his father first told him about the Manzanar Project several years ago he didn't really get it.

"I didn't understand it. But in the last 10 years I've come to appreciate what he has accomplished, what he has already accomplished," said Nathan from his home in Honolulu. "It's a simple idea. It's a simple but very radical idea."

Nathan is one of six Sato kids, a biologist by degree but currently the owner of the Malle Kai Chocolate company in Hawaii.

Recently he's been talking to his father about helping out more with the project he first learned about while in his 20s.

"We want to inject new life into the project," he said.

Nathan and his Japanese wife are planning a new direct mail piece, perhaps a new Web site and efforts to raise funds in Japan. He also believes the Manzanar Project qualifies for carbon credits for its efforts to reduce global warming.

His help on the project will be a welcome addition for Sato who still works on the Manzanar Project daily with little help.

Jack Hauck is his lone paid staff member in the United States. A social worker by training, Hauck first learned about Sato's work in Africa in an AOL pop-up notice. Intrigued, he called the listed number and before long he was having a five-hour lunch at the Sato residence.

"He's just smart. He just looks at things in different ways," Hauck, 63, said. "He should have gotten a Nobel Peace Prize years ago."

Sato may not have a Nobel Prize to his name but he has been honored with several awards over the years including the Blue Planet Prize of 2005 and the 2002 Rolex Award.

Close to two decades after first introducing the Manzanar Project, Sato shows little sign of slowing down.

"My role at this point in life is not to be in the field. I've already done that," he said. "I'm sort of the administer now, getting funds and distributing funds. It's a job I hate; I'd much rather be in field."

"I'm very proud of my father. He never ceases to amaze me. He can't sit still. He's go, go, go," Nathan said.

But with his father getting on in age, Nathan hopes he can be the bridge to help ensure the Manzanar Project continues far into the future.

"My father is getting on in years, and he needs more help," he said. "I want this thing to have a life of its own, to build up the project to become self-sustaining so the project will still carry on."

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