

# FORGIVEN, NOT FORGOTTEN

Hiroshima Survivor Takashi Tanemori Creates Hope And Inspires Healing With His Art By Renee Grant

WAR IS TERRIBLE. WE ALL KNOW THAT. IT COMES with pain and loss and physical destruction. But do we understand the real suffering? Except for reading a newspaper article or seeing a segment on the TV news, the hard experiences of ordinary people are not something we often think about. We don't really know what those who survive it go through.

But Takashi Tanemori knows. He's been through more than any of us can possibly imagine. On Aug. 6, 1945, he was an 8-year-old child playing hide and seek with his friends in a schoolyard in Hiroshima, Japan.

"I was 'it' that morning and covered my eyes, but I was peeking to make sure I knew where they would hide. I was counting to 10 and then I recall suddenly being engulfed by light and heat," said Tanemori about that horrific day 63 years ago. "I still remember the screaming of my classmates, asking for their mothers and fathers to come rescue them. They also cried for water. I cried, too. The air, all the oxygen...it was consumed. It got so dark and dusty I couldn't see my hands—yet sometime later I saw the reddish-yellow fires. Like serpents' tongues they came closer and closer and finally each classmate was consumed."

Tanemori was seven-tenths of a mile from ground zero. Hiroshima had been the target of the first nuclear bombing mission by the U.S. near the conclusion of World War II. His survival is a remarkable story of resilience and hope.

Since May of 2007, Tanemori has been preparing an exhibit of artwork especially for the Atomic Testing Museum, a popular Las Vegas attraction founded to preserve the history of nuclear weapons testing at the Nevada Test Site. It's called *The Bridge to Forgiveness* and features 80 pieces with his personal captions giving a chronological perspective of events leading up to the war, as well as illustrating the story of his life before and after the nuclear attack.

"What's the purpose of all this? It's to communicate my heart to others on how we can breach differences and resolve human conflict," explained Tanemori of the artwork he started doing in 2001. His collection now totals

140 pieces. "I have chosen the simple collage style. I use various media—colored pencils, watercolors, magic markers—and symbolism."

An absorbing exhibit, *The Bridge to Forgiveness* deals with the issues of war in a realistic, unromantic light. Tanemori conveys the magnitude of the disaster and the catastrophes he lived through while trying to rebuild his life. Amazingly, Tanemori was the recipient of great kindness from people at his most desperate times. For example, in that schoolyard, a young soldier, one of many who were training nearby, carried him from the fire and debris to a sandy embankment by the river.

"It was the only place that had not been touched by flames," said Tanemori. "Boys and girls, men and women...all scorched and maimed were gathered there fleeing the inferno and looking for loved ones. I cannot describe it completely. I haven't painted it yet, as it's still not quite settled in my mind."

Somehow Tanemori's father found him in the midst of the madness. His mother and youngest sister were never located. Three days later, they made their way to the countryside, crossing a "bridge made of human bodies" to begin their journey. They went to Kotachi, the village where his maternal grandmother resided. However, she shunned them and shamed his father for not being able to find her daughter. Tanemori said that his father went to Hiroshima several times to search for her and always returned with sunken eyes and cheeks. His father passed away less than a month after the blast.

"The night before he died, he looked like a skeleton, but his voice was still powerful," recalled Tanemori. "He said, 'My son, I have taught you the codes of the Samurai and how to live. I want you to promise yourself and then me that you will one day teach your children what I taught you. I want you to learn to live for the benefit of others—for then we all benefit.'"

It took Tanemori 40 years to grasp his father's meaning. Being parentless and feeling ostracized from society, Tanemori attempted suicide when he was 16—then he felt like a

failure for not succeeding. He immigrated to the U.S. when he was 18, settling in the Bay Area; however, his arrival here was anything but easy. Tanemori spent time in an internment camp, suffered extreme poverty and ended up in a psychiatric hospital, where he became the victim of experimental radiation removal treatments. As with the soldier, at his lowest point, an angelic nurse at the facility named Mary Furr stepped forward to become his guardian. There are images in *The Bridge to Forgiveness* that pay homage to both Furr and the soldier.

Tanemori eventually married and had three children. For many years he was a speaker at antiwar rallies. It wasn't until 1985 that he was finally able to let go of his painful past. While driving to a gathering, he was crossing the Bay Bridge and noticed a cloud forming over Treasure Island. It was similar to a mushroom cloud in appearance and took him back to the day of the bombing in Hiroshima. He pulled over and experienced what he calls "a transformation turning from revenge to forgiveness." Tanemori saw the faces of all those who had helped him, heard the voice of his youngest daughter pleading with him to change his bitter ways and, worst of all, felt his father's disappointment for not keeping his promise.

"It took me 40 years to grasp this. I wasted so much of my life with a desire for revenge," said Tanemori humbly and with tears in his eyes. "First, my hatred and anger were directed toward Japanese society for their icy, merciless treatment to war-torn children, and then toward America, as I had traced my father's death to the bomb and wanted to avenge his loss."

Tanemori admitted that his pathway from Hiroshima has been a hard and painful one. He doesn't want anyone else to go through it—but for those who do, his main message is to remember that the way through anger is learning to forgive.

*The Bridge to Forgiveness* exhibition runs through Sept. 7. It's free to the public and open daily for viewing. The Atomic Testing Museum is located at 755 W. Flamingo Road. Call 702-794-5161. **wo**