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President Obama Names Asian American Civil Rights Hero Gordon Hirabayashi Recipient of Presidential Medal of Freedom

WASHINGTON – On Thursday, April 26, President Obama named the late Gordon Hirabayashi one of 13 recipients of this year’s Presidential Medal of Freedom awards. Members of the Asian American Center for Advancing Justice (Advancing Justice)—Asian American Institute, Asian American Justice Center, Asian Law Caucus and Asian Pacific American Legal Center—and the Fred T. Korematsu Institute for Civil Rights and Education applaud the president for awarding the nation’s highest civilian honor to Hirabayashi, who passed away earlier this year on January 2. The Medal of Freedom is presented to individuals who have made especially meritorious contributions to the security or national interests of the United States, to world peace, or to cultural or other significant public or private endeavors. President Obama will present the awards at the White House in late spring.

“Gordon Hirabayashi was an American hero. We are thrilled to hear that he will receive a posthumous Presidential Medal of Freedom, an honor which will help spread awareness of his courageous story,” said Ling Woo Liu, director of the Fred T. Korematsu Institute for Civil Rights and Education, a program of the Asian Law Caucus.

In 1942, Hirabayashi was a 24-year-old student at the University of Washington when President Franklin Roosevelt ordered the internment of 120,000 Japanese Americans during World War II. Hirabayashi, an American citizen, refused to comply with the forced relocation order and instead turned himself in to the FBI in order to assert his belief that the internment order was racially discriminatory. He was convicted by a U.S. Federal District Court in Seattle of defying the exclusion order and violating curfew. Hirabayashi appealed his conviction all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled against him in 1943. Following World War II and his time in prison, Hirabayashi obtained his doctoral degree in sociology and became a professor at the University of Alberta in Canada. In 1987, his conviction was overturned by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit.

In 1999, the former Catalina Honor Camp, where he was sentenced to hard labor in the 1940s, was renamed the Gordon Hirabayashi Recreation Site. Since 2007, East West Players, an Asian American theater company, has produced stage productions based on his life. In May 2011, acting U.S. Solicitor General Neal Katyal released an unprecedented “confession of error,” on behalf of the Department of Justice, in both the Korematsu and Hirabayashi cases.
The Asian American Center for **Advancing Justice** (www.advancingjustice.org) works to promote a fair and equitable society for all by working for civil and human rights and empowering Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and other underserved communities, and is comprised of the Asian American Justice Center (www.advancingequality.org), the Asian American Institute (www.aaichicago.org), the Asian Law Caucus (www.asianlawcaucus.org) and the Asian Pacific American Legal Center (www.apalc.org).