



I Am American

A FILM BY KELSI UMEKO

LOGLINE

When Executive Order 9066 forces a Japanese American family from their Washington State home into a desert concentration camp, they must fight to preserve their dignity, identity, and faith in a country that has turned against them.

Why Now

Who gets to belong? Who gets to be called “American”?

This story is not just history. It shows just how quickly rights can be taken away from citizens when fear outweighs justice.

By personalizing a chapter often reduced to textbooks, this film transforms statistics into faces, policies into heartbreak, and history into lived experience. It invites audiences to see themselves, or their grandparents, in this family’s struggle. In doing so, it fosters empathy, vigilance, and a deeper understanding of the responsibility that comes with democracy.

This is not simply a period piece. It is a mirror. And it is a warning.



WHY IT MATTERS

We must humanize immigrant stories.

This story honors the universal immigrant journey of pursuing the American Dream. We follow one family whose life was violently stripped away when they were sent to a concentration camp during World War II, the film reveals how fragile that promise can be.

It reminds audiences that the American Dream has, at times, been denied not because of failure or lack of patriotism, but because of fear, prejudice, and policy.

The Story

Set in early 1900s Seattle following an Issei picture bride and her husband as they build a successful community restaurant and raise Nisei children. Their journey highlights their deep integration into American life, marked by their son's U.S. Army enlistment and their daughter's marriage to her Caucasian childhood sweetheart.

However, the narrative shifts drastically following the attack on Pearl Harbor and the issuance of Executive Order 9066. The family faces profound injustice as they are forced into concentration camps, losing their business and home and given only a suitcase each to pack their lives in. This story explores their heartbreak, resilience, and the endurance of their family bond despite the collapse of their American Dream.



Visual Tone

Chris Koser, *Director of Photography*, specializes in natural light. Our goal is to transform cold history into a living, breathing present. Trading archival distance for a raw, modern intimacy. This cinematic closeness invites us to feel every heartbeat of the family's journey as if it were our own.



Historic Locations



PANAMA HOTEL

Featuring the story of Mr. Hori



THE NW RAILWAY MUSEUM

Primary means of transporting Japanese Americans to assembly centers and concentration camps.



VIRGINIA V STEAMSHIP

Vital lifeline for Issei and Nisei farmers, particularly on Vashon Island.



BOTHELL HISTORICAL MUSEUM

Japanese American students attended classes at the Bothell School House.



ONIBABA RESTAURANT

Seattle's Nihonmachi Japantown



LAWNACRES FARM

Home of The Urban Herd

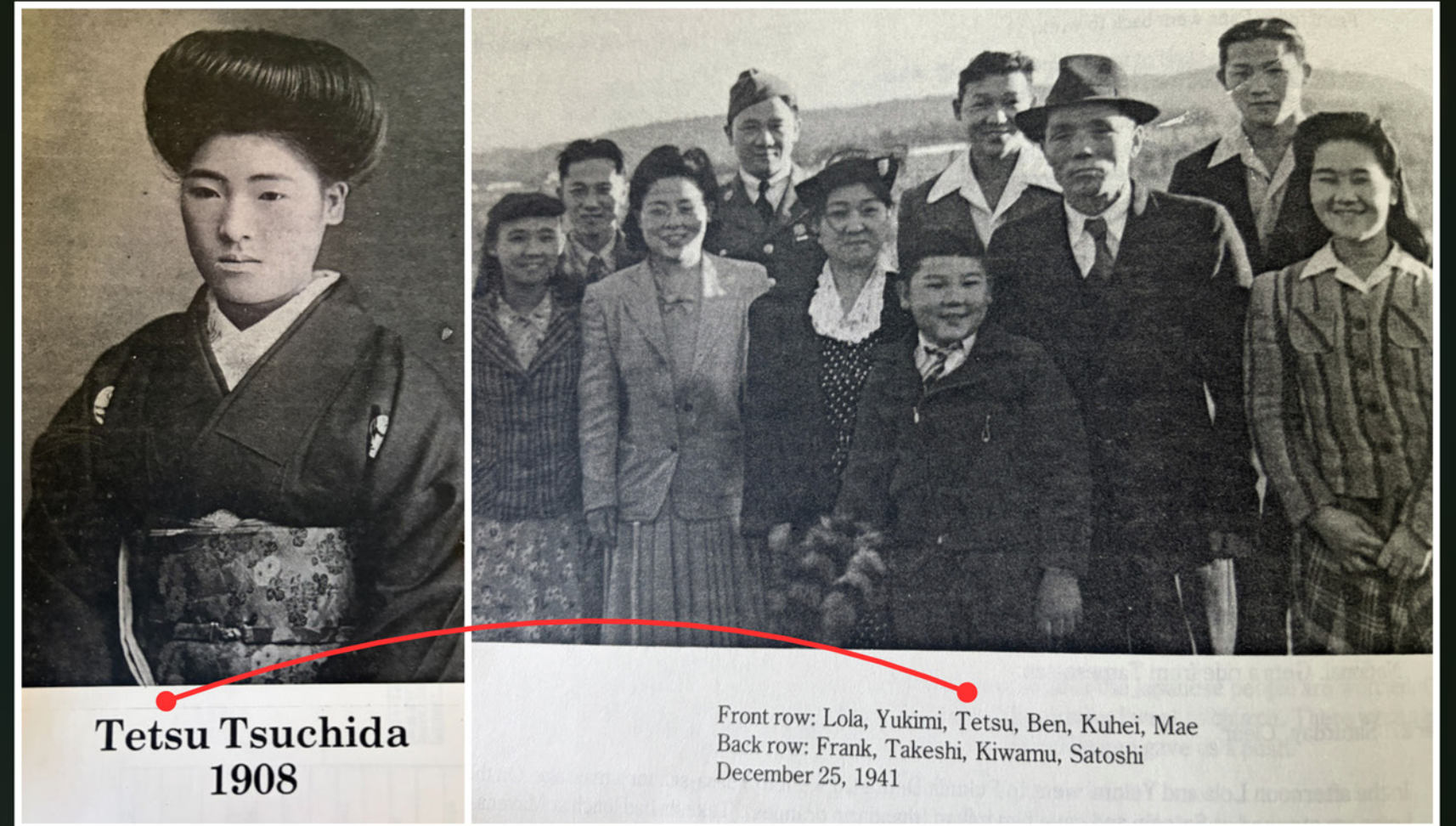
FROM THE DIRECTOR

This project is deeply personal to me because it tells the story of my grandparents and over 120,000 Japanese Americans whose lives were forever changed during World War II.

Growing up, I knew pieces of their story, but the older I get, the more I realize the weight of what they endured. They were American citizens who had their freedoms stripped away overnight simply because of their ancestry. Forced from their homes, separated from normal life, and imprisoned behind barbed wire for four years.

I wrote this short film inspired by my own family, the lived experiences of other Nikkei families, and the poetry of survivor Suma Yagi. Through her words, I could feel the fear, grief, confusion, and resilience of a young teenage girl trying to make sense of losing everything she once knew. Her poetry gave voice to emotions so many carried in silence.

What breaks my heart most is that while my grandparents and their families were imprisoned in concentration camps, my grandfather and uncles were serving in the United States



Photos: Kelsi's great-grandmother before arriving to the US (left) and her family at the Tule Lake concentration camp (right). Her great-grandfather and uncles remained on active duty during this painful time.

military. They were willing to fight for a country that no longer saw them as fully American.

I'm telling this story because I never want these experiences to be forgotten. I want future generations to recognize injustice when they see it, stand beside those being oppressed, and remember the humanity in one another.

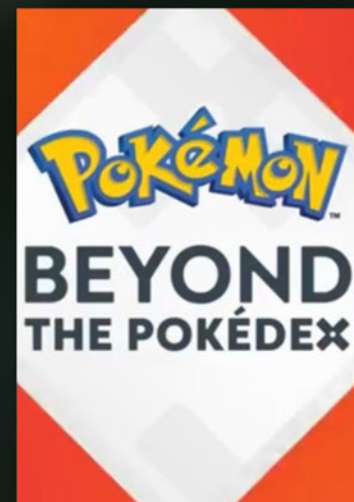
WRITER/DIRECTOR

KELSI UMEKO

[IMDB](#)

Kelsi Umeko is a Japanese American filmmaker, actor, poducer.

She is the current host of Pokémon's show: **Beyond the Pokédex**. She has worked with major brands including T-Mobile, Alaska Airlines, REI, Amazon, Microsoft, Meta, Delta, American Heart Association, Stryker, UW Health, etc. She has appeared in shows on HBO, Adult Swim, TNT, Amazon Prime, Apple TV, and Tubi, alongside numerous A-list Hollywood talent. Her directorial feature film, **Second Chance**, was distributed on Amazon Prime, Apple TV, Tubi, and Google Play, and received nominations for Most Inspirational Feature Film and Best Lead Actress.



DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

CHRIS KOSER

[IMDB](#)

chriskoser.com

[People Magazine](#)

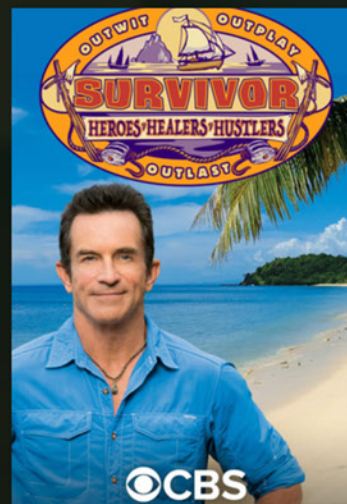
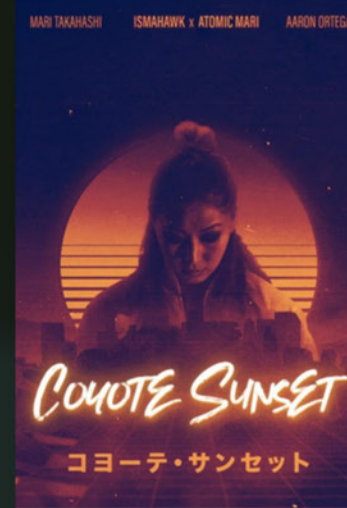
Chris Koser is a Seattle-born cinematographer and director known for his dynamic visual storytelling across narrative films, documentaries, commercials, and music videos. Since beginning his career in 2009, he has filmed in more than 17 countries and shot over 160 commercial projects worldwide. His cinematography credits include Paramount+ ***Freedom's Path***, ***Boom: A Film About the Sonics***, ***The Sound***, and Polyphia's ***Playing God***. Chris has earned multiple festival awards and nominations throughout his career, building a reputation for cinematic imagery that blends emotional depth with bold, immersive camera work. He continues to work internationally as a freelance Director of Photography based in Los Angeles and Seattle.



TSUNE PLAYED BY

MARI TAKAHASHI [IMDB](#)

Mari Takahashi is a bilingual Japanese-American actor, award-winning TV and digital host, and producer. Mari can be seen in **Artificial**, **Action! Action!**, and **Coyote Sunset**. She has done commercial work for Lacoste, Ericsson, Gunnar Optics, and Verizon. Mari is a classically trained former professional ballerina and cinematic martial artist. She is a Conservatory graduate of The Lee Strasberg Film & Theatre Institute for Method Acting and Holds a Bachelor of Arts in Performing Arts from St. Mary's College of California. Mari is a 10+ year hosting veteran. Past shows/clients include Netflix Geeked, Polygon Speedrun, Paramount Pictures, Google Play Live, and Comic-Con International. During her 10-year tenure with the YouTube channel **SMOSH**, Mari won a Webby, two Streamy Awards, co-founded SMOSH Games, and produced and starred in shows like **Maricraft** (47MM+ views), **Smosh Pit Weekly** (120MM+ views), and **Operation: Open World**, which bridged gaming with adventurous travel.



HAIR AND MAKE-UP DESIGNER

NANCY J. HVASTA LEONARDI

[IMDB](#)

Nancy Hvasta Leonardi is a hair and makeup artist working in film and television, with credits including *NCIS: Hawai'i*, *Back to the Future Part II*, *The Matrix Resurrections*, *Star Trek*, *Yellowstone*, *Station 19*, *Memoirs of a Geisha* along with other independent and large studio productions.

She specializes in character-driven makeup design, on-set continuity, and collaborative work with directors and production teams to support each project's visual storytelling.

Nancy is known for her detail-oriented approach and adaptability across both naturalistic and stylized looks in independent film environments.



1ST AD

ERIC “Z” ZARAGOZA [IMDB](#)

Eric Zaragoza is a Mexican American film director from Southern California. He has traveled internationally both as a United States Marine and as a filmmaker.

His work has been featured on PlayStation Network, Xbox Live, Netflix, Amazon, and Fox Action Channel. He received a prestigious Vimeo award for his directorial debut, **Dead Space: Chase to Death**. Known for his emotionally driven storytelling, Eric combines strong human connection with visually rich and colorful worlds.

He is also known by the nickname “Director Z.”



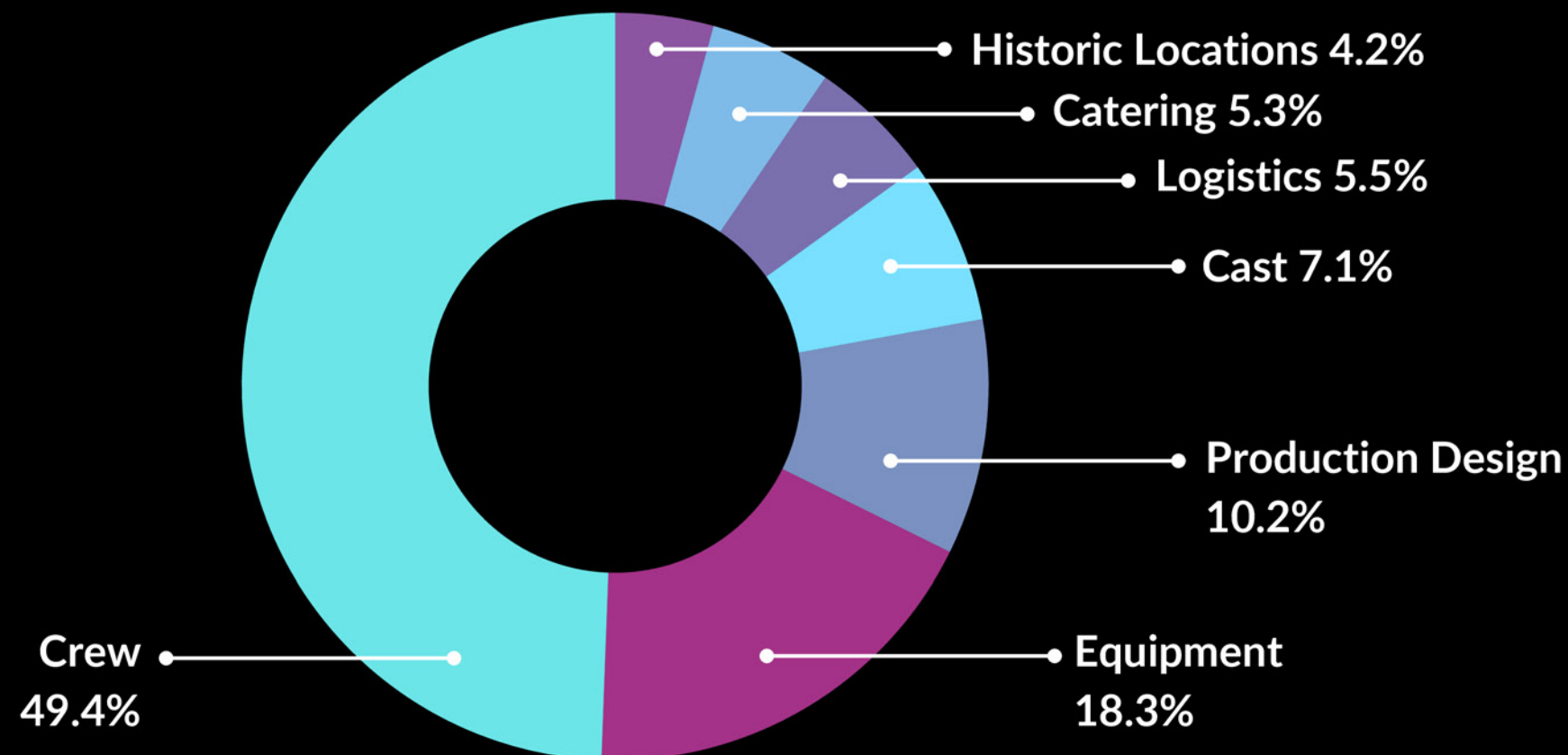
FINANCIALS

This production will be filmed in Washington State, resulting in the employment of 150+ local residents.

Production Target \$65K

A \$65,000 fund unlocks:

- Cinema Grade Equipment ARRI ALEXA 35 XTREME and necessary hard drives
- 10 Historic Locations, Period Production Design
- 30 crew and 120 cast are working at reduced rates or donated time



Stretch Goal \$85K

An \$85,000 fund unlocks:

- Payment to everyone who donated their time at reduced rates
- Post-production costs

Stretch Goal \$125K

A \$125,000 fund unlocks:

- Full day rates for cast + crew, Post-production
- Film festival submissions to Sundance, TIFF, Telluride
- Marketing for distribution to PBS, History Channel, Academy Awards Qualification

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Make a Tax Deductible Donation

Northwest Film Forum is a 501(c)3 non-profit accepting donations from individuals as well as corporations on our behalf as our official fiscal sponsor.

To donate by check, please make it out to

Northwest Film Forum with **'I Am American'**

written in the memo field (*very important!!*)

Check can be sent to the following address:

Northwest Film Forum

1515 12th Avenue, Seattle, WA 98122

[Click here to donate via Paypal](#)

Additional charges may apply.

Hard Drive Donation

The rising cost of external hard drives this year is an unexpected expense. What used to be hundreds is now thousands.

SPECIFICATIONS 14TB, reliable, fast-transfer

Spread the Word!

Please share this pitch deck and donation links to anyone who might be interested in supporting this production! This film cannot be made without your support and this story has never been told in such a cinematic way.

INSTAGRAM [@iamamericanfilm](#) [@kelsiumeko](#)

COMMUNITY CHAMPIONS

Executive Producer

- Teresa Yagi, *Daughter of Suma Yagi, Kirkland Dental*

Locations

- **Bothell Historical Museum:** Kenneth Douth
- **Northwest Railway Museum:** VJ Kopacki
- **Onibaba Restaurant:** Marin Caccam & Sho Caccam
- **Panama Hotel:** Jan Johnson
- **Private Residence:** Jennifer Cockrill & Allison Cockrill
- **Private Residence:** Tina Fujii
- **Virginia V Steamship:** Alicia Barnes

Historical Accuracy Advisors

- Ben Tsuchida, *Concentration Camp Survivor*
- Brian Niiya, *Densho Content Director*
- Chris Tashima, *Oscar-winner, Academy Governor*
- Dale Watanabe, *Commander, Nisei Veterans Committee*
- Derek Nguyen, *WSHS Mktg & Comms Director*
- Eileen Yamada Lamphere, *JACL Puyallup President*
- Junior Yasuda, *Concentration Camp Survivor*
- Kiyomi Makiya, *Kotobuki Kimono Rentals Owner*
- Kyle Kinoshita, *JACL Seattle President*
- Kyoko Matsumoto, *former Mayor of Mountlake Terrace*



Thank You

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CK FILMS PRODUCTIONS

A JAPANESE NAME

AN AMERICAN STORY

SUMA YAGI

EDITED BY VICTOR YAGI
& FRANCES McCUE

