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Huge spontaneous effort supports illegal immigrant

EASTLAKE HIGH GRAD FACES DEPORTATION TO JAPAN

By Kelley Dupuis

STAFF WRITER

Shigeru Yamada, 22, who graduated from EastLake High School in 2000 and currently coaches softball there, is discovering that he has a virtual army of friends he never met before.

"He's a great guy, super-positive, you can't have a bad time with him," said Pedro Reyes, who went to EastLake with Yamada — they were president and vice-president of the ASB, respectively — and who has been one of the movers and shakers spearheading a grassroots campaign to get permission for Yamada to remain in the United States.

Yamada has lived in the U.S. since he was 10, and although he was born in Japan, he isn't even sure where his birthplace is. (He says previous reports that he was born in Osaka are wrong. "Somewhere else" was as close as he could pinpoint his real birthplace.)

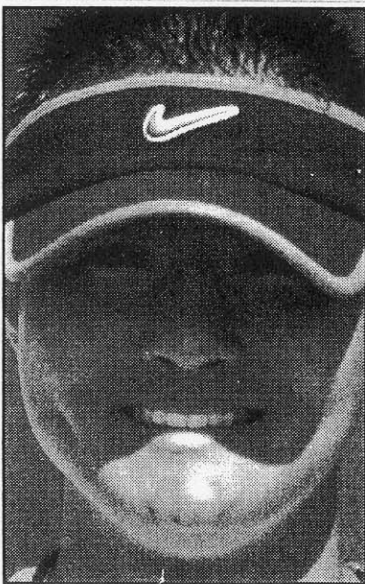
He has no relatives in Japan that he's aware of. He doesn't speak Japanese. If he should end up getting sent back to Japan, he doesn't know what he'll do.

Yamada's predicament has a long history. He was brought to the U.S. by his mother, who entered the country legally, as a student. She died in a car accident two years later. He and two sisters were reared by relatives in Chula Vista.

An aunt was planning to adopt Yamada, but the plans fell through. One of his sisters was adopted by another family member; another married an American at age 21 and became legal through marriage.

But Yamada remained in a shadowy, "underground" status as he approached adulthood, and the hammer came down on April 26 when he was taken off a bus by immigration officials conducting a routine check, and put in jail.

Congressman Bob Filner sponsored a bill, HR 1948, in the House of Representatives last year which would let Yamada stay in the country, but Filner himself has expressed doubts that the bill will pass.



PHOTO/KELLEY DUPUIS

Shigeru Yamada

But whether it does or not, Yamada's case has greatly increased the workload of Filner's staff, and those of other legislators as well, if only because there has been such an enormous outpouring of support for Yamada.

"I really didn't know what to do at first," Reyes said. "I was shocked and saddened. But my girlfriend here at Berkeley, Vanessa Benitez, is a really good organizer. She knows what to do."

Reyes said he and his girlfriend swung into action when they heard about Yamada's plight, contacting his lawyer to ask what they could do to help. She reportedly advised them to "write letters and make Bob Filner's phone ring non-stop."

"We started telling everyone we knew, including people here at Berkeley who never met Shigeru," said Reyes.

Reyes also began calling every media outlet he could think of to publicize Yamada's troubles.

"This has to get out and the public has to know about it, or the U.S. government and the INS could do whatever they wanted with Shigeru," he said.

Reyes said by the middle of last week, he and his girlfriend had received between 200 and 500 calls in support of Yamada. And they're

telling everyone the same thing: call Filner, and write to members of the House Judiciary Committee on Yamada's behalf.

Jan Wagner is a retired accountant living in El Cajon. She heard about Yamada's situation on television and started writing and recruiting without hesitation.

"I could not believe what I was hearing," she said of the TV news reports. "I thought this was unfair, and decided to do what I could to help him. Here we are, trying to deport a young man who is productive and is a credit to our community. Here's a kid who didn't ask for any help whatsoever. He was working, going through school, and then they do a bus raid and pull him in. This is ridiculous. There are other people who, as far as I'm concerned, should be deported instead of him."

Wagner promptly recruited members of a water aerobics class which she attends in east county three times a week to help out with the letter-writing campaign as well.

"I had his attorney give me his story and an update on him, and I took that information to class and gave a little speech, posted the stuff, and seven or eight women said they were going to write letters to Congress because that's what the attorney told me to do."

Wagner said she thinks sending Yamada back to Japan would be "criminal."

"I don't normally take up causes, but I just thought this was unfair, that's all," she said. "He's a nice kid. It's just insane."

Asked why he didn't just turn himself in and get a hearing that way, Yamada said he didn't want to go public with his predicament because he would only have had a fifty-fifty chance if he did.

He preferred to wait and see what would happen in the legislature, not just with Filner's bill but with a pending piece of Senate legislation, The Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) act.

"Obviously, I was hoping these bills would pass before I got caught," Yamada said.