Community of Conscience

Benjamin Grieco, Lindsey Heiser, Julianna Hodgson,

Noah Stephan, Sara Tran, Harrison Zern

Department of Criminal Justice, Psychology, Sociology and Anthropology, Messiah University

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Dr. Jenell Paris

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Project Overview

The Fall 2025 Sociology, Anthropology and Criminal Justice senior seminar class at Messiah University in cooperation with the J. Sherwood McGinnis, Jr. War, Peace and Justice Project (WPJP) collaborated on the project Building a Community of Conscience: The Fred Korematsu Story. The focus of the project was twofold: first, to research the Fred Korematsu trial, and second, researching and interviewing community organizations in and around Carlisle, Pennsylvania to help build a "community of conscience". The WPJP defines a community of conscience as being "where the 'Golden Rule' is alive within hearts and minds, and where moral agency and caring thrives. It becomes our 'Bethel' because our actions create a holy and good place."

The first part of this project was learning about Fred Korematsu's story and Japanese internment during World War II. This was accomplished through reading books like *Prisoners Without Trial* by Roger Daniels and *Art of Gaman* by Delphine Hirasuna, watching documentaries like *Of Civil Rights and Wrongs: The Fred Korematsu Story*, and researching various art pieces of those who were in internment camps. While researching various art pieces we also acquired two pieces from the International Peace Museum in Dayton, Ohio. Another way we researched Japanese internment was through Messiah University itself, as it has ties to the Sakimura family who stayed at the university during World War II. We also reached out to individuals associated with Fred Korematsu. This included Lorraine Bannai, a third generation Japanese American lawyer who actively worked on his legal case during the 1980s, his daughter Karen Korematsu, the American Civil Liberties Union of Pennsylvania and the Japanese American Citizens League.

The second part of this project was researching different non-profit organizations in Carlisle and the greater Cumberland County area to learn who they are and what their goals are. These organizations were Carlisle Bridge Builders, Partnership for Better Health, Sunrise Rotary, Community Cares, Moving Circles, Safe Harbor, United Way and the International Service Center. Furthermore, we interviewed locals in the Carlisle area and asked them their thoughts on common ethics and community. This was done through short interviews and a 5-question online questionnaire.

The Legacy of Korematsu

The story of Fred Korematsu teaches us how moral courage does not emerge from individuals of perfection, status, or power, but rather from ordinary individuals that hold strong moral imperatives in the face of injustice. In 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, authorizing the forced removal and incarceration of Japanese Americans from their homes. Korematsu refused to comply, acting from a personal conviction that the policy violated the Constitution and the basic dignity it promised to all citizens. Korematsu's resistance compels us to confront an essential question: how do individuals know when something is morally wrong, even if the law says otherwise? In 1983, the federal court vacated Korematsu's conviction. Later in 2018, the Supreme Court declared an overrule of the conviction, demonstrating how due process and equal protection principles of the Fourteenth Amendment can be ignored under national fear, and highlighting the moral failures of the legal system.

Our research on Fred Korematsu fostered our sense of moral awareness of the potential clash between justice and law during crises. The case illustrated how perception of laws and rights changed in the midst of fear, often resulting in the discrimination of minority populations, and how readily constitutional norms may be disregarded. In addition, we had the opportunity to engage with Lorraine Bannai, one of Korematsu's Supreme Court lawyers. Bannai's willingness to participate in our research enhanced our comprehension of the Korematsu's story and enabled direct engagement with an individual who attempted to rectify the historical injustice. In 1983, Korematsu's case was revisited due to fresh evidence of governmental impropriety, and in 1998, he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom. These milestones exemplify the protracted journey toward justice, confirming WPJP's objective of fostering knowledge, humility, and dedication to the collective welfare. They underscore the Constitution's potential as a common reference for all individuals, even within periods of discord.

Korematsu's narrative is significant as it prompts us to consider measures to prevent the recurrence of similar tragedies. In order to work towards a solution of uniting a community despite personal differences, collective moral responsibility must first be recognized. This means understanding that constitutional rights are not just ideas, but protections that depend on everyone being vigilant. We learn from Korematsu that in order to protect justice, people must speak out, fight back, and voice their worries when constitutional values are threatened. His

legacy requires us to be deeply committed to due process, equal protection, and the strength to stand up for the rights of everyone, even when it is not popular to do so.

Community of Conscience

As we researched the ethical standing of various communities, we learned that consistency is a driving force in establishing a community's moral compass. In referring to consistency, we mean frequent and routine meetings among community members. Consistency is useful to build trust, which is a fundamental part of creating a sense of community. It is also indispensable in meeting the needs of a community, as those needs are ever changing. A stagnant community would thus be unable to sufficiently fulfill their material and social needs. We have learned that fulfilling these needs will also strengthen community stability, as maximizing the satisfaction of basic needs will reduce the amount of people who are constrained by not having adequate resources. The requirement for a community to understand their needs as a collective relates to the significance that education has in community building. We see the focal points of education being to inform people within the community of members who have drastically different lifestyles, and understanding the present issues at hand, specific to their community. The importance of the former point was made clear to us in our discovery that social barriers communities face can be overcome when community members interact with diverse members in a shared environment, as well as how these interactions shape each member of the community. Explaining these two points in such detail will prove helpful in understanding how our findings relate to the War, Peace, and Justice Project's mission.

Our research helped to make us aware of and more informed about existing issues that the War, Peace, and Justice Project hopes to alleviate, with their goal to do so being one of their primary objectives. The War, Peace, and Justice Project mentions a desire to "increase civil-military interaction by maximizing community involvement" as one of the first parts of their mission statement ("The J. Sherwood," n.d.). An interview that we had conducted with Ken and Marcia of Moving Circles had revealed concerns for a problem within their own community where the proposed solution to that problem aligns quite closely to this goal. Ken and Marcia had brought up cultural isolation in their area being a large issue, mentioning that the attempts required to combat this need to be carried out by community members first. An individual should begin by increasing their engagement with those whom they already know in their community.

Upon doing so, those people will then be able to engage among those within close proximity. While Ken and Marcia's focus with the work they do for Moving Circles is not placed specifically on civil-military interactions as it is for the War, Peace, and Justice Project, their plan to combat cultural isolation quite directly ties into the War, Peace, and Justice Project's goal to increase community involvement.

As the information that our research provided us regarding issues present within communities increased, so did our awareness of other concerns. It is worth noting that the concerns of the latter grew in number at a faster rate than did the answers we were able to derive from the former. While many of the troubling awarenesses that we had discovered over the course of our research remain ones that we don't have answers to, we find it worthwhile to present them, as they relate to the War, Peace, and Justice Project's mission. One such concern is that even if systems that help to effectively build community and inform those communities of the role that conflict has on them exists, a willingness from the community to receptively participate might not. If this is the case, the sole purpose of these systems would fail. Another concern that we learned of was basic needs (education, finance, shelter, food, etc.) conflicting with community stability goals. If a community is faced with something such as food insecurity, not only do we see that taking priority over the goal to build community and awareness, but we also see that issue greatly imposing upon the amount of time that a community would have to devote themselves to such services. Our belief is that a community faced with the resource and time constraints that insufficient basic need fulfillment would impose upon that community would usurp the time that is required for its members to participate in programs that are not indispensable to life. We believe that it is crucial to express this concern because it means that in environments where basic needs are not being met, it is almost certain that War, Peace, and Justice Programs (or any non-essential program/service, for that matter) will completely fail.

Reflection & Recommendations

Not only were we able to serve the WPJP's parallel objectives pertaining to the January 2026 Fred Korematsu event and their overarching mission of 'building a community of conscience', but WPJP also provided us with a learning opportunity. The first main objective of this project was to detail the significance of Japanese-American internment through historical

education and to discuss the difficult parts of U.S. history that may be challenging but not impossible to grasp. Beyond the themes of unjust racial profiling, discrimination, and persecution confined to being applied to Japanese-American internment during WWII, it can be applied to various other parts of U.S. history and even in the current day. How does one cope with and, or confront, such complex social issues? The answer vaguely lies within the second main objective, and WPJP's larger vision for the surrounding community of Carlisle: building a community of conscience together.

The concept of 'building a community of conscience' centers around the following questions: who do we want to be, what kind of community and world do we want to reside in, and what will we do to achieve it? This effort teaches us that we all have ethical responsibilities, both individually and collectively. There is a need for us to educate ourselves and grasp what is, not only through our own lens, but also through the lens of others. A holistic approach is necessary to properly comprehend the intricate issues at hand that may or may not impact you, requiring a level of respect and care for others who are impacted. Through recognizing those issues, consequently are the action steps that are needed to create a holy and caring environment where everyone can feel at peace knowing they are accepted and respected despite their differences. Thus, in respect to the project's main objectives, fostering cultural and racial literacy within the community is a compelling step of reconciliation that can be done together, through respecting and supporting one another.

With respect to WPJP's mission and outlined objectives, we were obliged to grapple with a complex reality, whether it be then or even now. We are reminded that a complex reality may be difficult to holistically comprehend, but it is an active choice to do so. Furthermore, WPJP places an emphasis of appreciation for humanities, like art and literature, and its uses for visual representation. By viewing a story through various mediums, one can better receive and understand the teaching that is conveyed to them. Art has the capacity to bring a grounded and emotionally accessible aspect as the storytelling of individuals both verbally and visually create empathy. Inspired by such philosophy, we proposed the idea of including a themed art display exhibit, revolving around Japanese-American internment, for the January 2026 Fred Korematsu event.

Moving forward, we hope WPJP will continue to support and network with surrounding non-profit organizations within the Carlisle community, further making meaningful connections to transform into valuable relationships. In addition, We would like to encourage community engagement with visual art as an accessible means of connection and reflection. Creating community pieces with attendees can draw diverse ages and backgrounds to grapple with issues of peace and social justice. If there is to be a 'Q&A' session for the panelists, a QR code to an anonymous form for the audience to submit questions would save more time, this eliminates the need to pass microphones to those who may have questions. Moreover, it allows desired audience anonymity, which may likely result in increased willingness to ask questions.

References

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