

## Justice Minister's Award

### The baton of life handed to me

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"Please share our story and pass on our history."

That is what Mr. NAKAO Shinji, who turned 90 this July, said to me.

Mr. Nakao's face and hands are visibly affected by the aftereffects of his disease, yet to me, everything about him is wonderful.

Mr. Nakao is the chairman of the residents' association at Nagashima Aiseien, a national Hansen's disease sanatorium in Okayama Prefecture. He has entrusted me with the responsibility of passing on the untold history of unjust discrimination against people with Hansen's disease, as well as the resilience of those who have survived it. That responsibility now weighs heavily on my heart.

Hansen's disease was once called "leprosy" and was widely despised. Because it is a chronic infectious disease that can cause visible disabilities in the hands, feet, and face, people with the disease were feared and shunned. It has long been overcome in Japan, so those who once had the disease are now referred to as "former patients" or "recovered individuals."

In 1907, the Japanese government enacted the Leprosy Prevention Act, treating those with the disease as a national disgrace (the Act was abolished in 1996). Patients were forcibly removed from their communities and isolated in remote facilities like Aiseien. In doing so, the government not only incited discrimination but also fueled public fear, leading ordinary citizens to participate in the exclusion of patients. A nationwide movement called the Leprosy-Free Prefecture Campaign encouraged local authorities to compete in rounding up patients, accelerating the forced isolation. It wasn't until 2001 that this lifelong segregation policy was declared unconstitutional. The government admitted its wrongdoing, issued a formal apology, and established a compensation law.

At Aiseien, remnants of that painful history remain—the dock where patients were forcibly separated from their families, the disinfecting stations where their belongings and bodies were sterilized, and the confinement rooms where those who tried to escape or resisted staff were locked away. Patients were forbidden from having children; men

were forcibly sterilized, and women were forced to have abortions. As I walked through Aiseien, this tragic history was etched into my heart.

There is also a columbarium, a place for the remains of those who passed away at the sanatorium. The sanatorium itself is supposed to be equivalent to a hospital, a place where people receive treatment. But the very existence of the columbarium represents the absolute lifelong isolation, showing that these patients were never allowed to return home—not even in death. There is a haiku written by a resident:

*Is it time yet?*

*Even as bones, the answer remains: Not yet.*

I believe this poem expresses the deep sorrow and anger of those who were victims of this government policy.

Today, Aiseien is home to about 80 residents. Its columbarium holds the remains of approximately 3,800 people, and the remains of the 80 current residents will eventually also rest there. The thought of this brings tears to my eyes. And yet, for that very reason, I feel a stronger determination to treasure the time I have with the residents—to listen to their stories while I still can.

One of Mr. Nakao's stories will never leave me.

At the age of 14, he was sent to Aiseien. When he recovered, he was allowed to return home temporarily during the busy farming season to help his older brother, who was overjoyed to see him. But one day, his brother said, "Please leave, and never come back."

His brother was about to get married. With a family to protect, he could no longer afford to let others know about Nakao's existence.

I can only imagine how devastating it must have been to hear those words. My heart aches just thinking about it.

But Mr. Nakao continued, "It must have been painful for my brother to say that. He must have suffered throughout his family life, hiding my existence."

At that moment, I was struck by the harsh reality of discrimination—how it tears families apart. But at the same time, I saw the incredible strength of a man who had endured severe discrimination yet still chose to think of others before himself. In him, I learned the true meaning of kindness. And in my heart, I made a promise to become someone who, like Mr. Nakao, embodies unconditional kindness and empathy.

Even now, Mr. Nakao remains active as the head of the residents' association, working with his peers to have Aiseien recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage site. His passion lies in ensuring that Aiseien remains a place where people can learn the importance of

human rights.

Just the other day, I visited Aiseien with a group of friends to celebrate Mr. Nakao's 90th birthday. Seeing him smile as he enjoyed his cake, saying, "I'm so glad to be alive," was truly heartwarming.

That day, he shared something important with us.

"Just recently, the old Eugenic Protection Act was ruled unconstitutional. It was a lawsuit brought by people with disabilities who were forcibly sterilized or made to have abortions. The Act applied to people with Hansen's disease too, so I was also sterilized. That's why none of us have children. That's why there's no one to pass down our stories and our history. And that's what makes me saddest of all. So, I'm asking you—please share our story and pass on our history."

That was the moment I described at the beginning. His face grew serious for a moment, but then he quickly broke into a smile and said,

"You know, they call turning 90 *sotsuju*—like 'graduation.' So, I've decided that I'm going to graduate from my past life and start afresh, as if I'm beginning a whole new life. That way, life will be fun again!"

I held his hand, feeling its warmth grounding me. And in that moment, I made a vow.

"I will share your story, Mr. Nakao.

I will pass on the lessons of Hansen's disease.

I will help create a world without bullying or discrimination—a society where all people, even people with illnesses and disabilities, can live together as equals."