

Coalition for Peace Action
Hiroshima and Nagasaki Commemoration

August 5, 2024

I would like to thank the Coalition for Peace Action for giving me this opportunity to speak today. My name is Shiho Burke, and my maiden name is Kikuzaki, which means chrysanthemums in Japanese.

I am the only child of two survivors of the Hiroshima bombing, Toru and Mizuha Kikuzaki.

At the time of the bombing, my parents were ten years old, attending Hiroshima Tenma Elementary School. On August 6th, 1945, my mother was where she was supposed to be, unfortunately just 1.1 kilometers away from the epicenter. My father was about 1.5 kilometers away from the blast, at home with a stomachache, which likely spared his life. Most people died in the initial explosion or within months or years from radiation sickness.

My mother was initially trapped under the burning remains. A miraculous shaft of light led her to climb out and escape from the debris that was once stood of her school. She sustained severe injuries to her arm and scalp. After her escape, she began to walk towards the designated bomb shelter where students were assigned to gather in case of an air raid. She was stopped by Japanese soldiers who told her she was walking toward the blast center. She then walked home.

Her house was still standing, and her mom and dad were there. Her 13 and 15-year-old brothers were at the factory, forced to build plane parts instead of attending their regular school. One of her brothers was badly burnt. He has since passed, but I remember him from my childhood as a handsome man with extensive scars covering his face.

Her older brother, Kunihiro, took his own life after a long struggle with depression due to his father's injuries and much of his own mobility being lost due to his extensive injuries.

My mother's beloved father, a government official and prominent businessman, went out of his way to help others. This led to his second exposure to radioactive fallout from the black rain. He died a few months later from radiation sickness in October at the age of thirty-eight.

Fortunately, my grandparents' two houses on their property withstood the blast. However, my grandmother had glass fragments embedded in her chest from shattered windows, which continued to surface through her skin year after year, which required the reconstructive surgery.

Initially, my aunt showed no signs of injuries, but the long-term effects claimed her life at the age of forty-two. My uncle, Joji, also succumbed to liver cancer in his forties 6 months apart from his sister's demise.

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On the day of the bombing, my mother began exhibiting symptoms of radiation sickness. This marked the beginning of her lifelong struggle with the physical effects of the bombing. Her condition progressively worsened until, at twenty-eight, her doctor pronounced her terminal and gave her three months to live.

Facing death, my mother's will to survive and ultimate turnaround to the eastern medicine saved her life.

After four miscarriages and one stillbirth, my mom gave up the idea of having a baby. Then she got pregnant at the age of 40 and gave birth to me in 1974.

Growing up in Hiroshima, my parents' firsthand experiences of the atomic bombing profoundly influenced my dedication to advocating for peace. Daily encounters with people whose lives had been shattered by the bombing encouraged me to spread the message of peace.

In 1984, Japanese director Yamada Tengo, known for "Barefoot Gen," and the prominent director and screenwriter Shindo Kaneto, whose movie "Postcard" was an Oscar selection for Best Foreign Film, allowed me to star in their movie "White Town Hiroshima." This film told the story of the girl whose life was drastically altered by the single bomb dropped in Hiroshima.

By the time I was 16, I was a member of the Crane Club dedicated to honoring Sadako Sasaki. Therefore, as a peace ambassador, I ended up with an opportunity to travel to Europe with a Hiroshima TV crew to film a documentary.

Ms. Hiroko Kajiyama, who passed away at the age of 16 from leukemia caused by atomic bomb disease, once said, 'Only that painful industrial museum will always speak to the world about the horrors of the atomic bomb.' Her words became the impetus for the preservation of the Atomic Bomb dorm.

Then, a small movement like a tiny flame grew into a widespread effort, and in 1967, the Atomic Bomb Dome began its first preservation work. Inspired by Hiroko Kajiyama's wish that sparked the preservation of the Atomic Bomb Dome, I embarked on a journey to trace the decisions made regarding the Dome and to explore the forgotten life of Jan Letzel who was the architect of atomic dorm in Hiroshima for 6 weeks from Vienna to Prague and Prague to Berlin.

This trip also included visits to the Theresienstadt concentration camp, Hitler's hideout, and the architectural school in Vienna that Hitler almost attended, which could have altered his path and prevented him from becoming the dictator he was.

The news of the Fukushima meltdown spread like wildfire, raising concerns about leaving my 78-year-old mother in Japan had intensified. The exposure to excessive radiation once was already a significant risk, and now my mother was facing a fatal second exposure to dangerous levels of radiation. On March 27, 2011, two weeks after the 3/11 disaster, I boarded a plane to retrieve my mother from ground zero.

It was surprising and distressing when the Japanese government not only concealed the truth about the accident's details but also provided misleading information to their own people. Scientists understood the numbers and facts, but the public was largely kept in the dark. It angered me that the first nation to witness the silent suffering from radiation's after-effects on the human body, and the first nation to witness the total destruction of human souls and mind resulted by radioactive contamination, would still resort to using radiation as an energy source due to shortages.

As a parent of three children, seeing mothers in Fukushima walking around with their radiation detectors to ensure their children's safety brought tears to my eyes. Health reports have already shown that the number of Fukushima children with thyroid cancer is reaching into the hundreds, and this is just the tip of the iceberg.

Throughout history, mankind has attempted to control and harness nuclear energy, but its failures have resulted in disasters from Fukushima to Chernobyl, and Hiroshima to Nagasaki.

Hiroshima and Nagasaki are not just events in history books; they are stark reminders of the devastating consequences of nuclear warfare. As a nuclear-armed nation and a country heavily reliant on nuclear power, we are placing the health and well-being of our people at significant risk.

The dangers are more pressing than ever, and we need to urgently rethink our stance on the disarmament of nuclear weapons and the use of nuclear reactors.

Knowing the unforeseen accidents and unfortunate tragedies we are likely to face in the future, we can't justify using nuclear energy or nuclear weapons.

Given the long-term physical and mental damages we must endure. We have no choice but to seek alternative solutions for our energy needs and rethink the weapons we choose to defend ourselves.

There were 215 atmospheric tests, and 815 underground tests were conducted by the US. The subcritical nuclear tests are still being conducted on American soil, and we do not know if these tests are safe or not.

In the current geopolitical climate, with Russia and North Korea threatening to use nuclear weapons and Iran pursuing its own nuclear arsenal, the world faces an unprecedented level of nuclear threat. It is imperative that we take collective action to reduce and eventually eliminate these risks to ensure a safer future for all.

We can't change the past or take back the mistakes we have already made. But we can indeed change the future by not repeating those mistakes.

Nuclear disarmament, not just in America or Japan but everywhere on earth, is a hard goal to reach, but it must be achieved. As Elie Wiesel once said, "To forget a holocaust is to kill twice." To forget any of these events is to kill twice.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to share my experience with the effects of this tragic event. Now, it is your job, your children's job, and even your grandchildren's job to preserve these memories. We cannot forget what happened on that fateful summer day, August 6th, 1945.