President Barack Obama’s designation of Honouliuli as a national monument in February 2015 was a big step in preserving the history of Japanese-Americans during World War II and in Hawaii. The work leading up to the epitaph was years in the making, but thanks to the work of two volunteer educators at Japanese Cultural Center of Hawaii, even bigger strides are being made in the preservation and education surrounding the site.

Jane Kurahara (far left) and Betsy Young will be honored with the Frank Haines Award at Historic Hawaii Foundation’s 42nd annual Preservation Honor Awards Celebration and Ceremony May 27 at Pomaikai Ballrooms for their work in identifying, documenting, evaluating and planning for the preservation of Honouliuli internment camp. The two started the journey in 1998 — by accident. At the time, a local television station called the JCCH resource center for information on the internment camp’s location for a special local segment prior to the screening of Schindler’s List.

“To our consternation, we could not help them,” Kurahara recalls. “There was no documentation here in the resource center (at JCCH). We went out and called around, and one or two people said they knew where it was, but they couldn’t agree on where it was.

“We realized that this was not only a customer request. It played into our (duty) to preserve the history of the Japanese in Hawaii, and here was this part of our Japanese history that was thinly documented.”

“It (internment story) was almost a forgotten history,” adds Young.

After four years of research, the duo got in touch with local farmer and history buff Larry Jefts, who was able to identify the site of the internment camp. With Jefts’ help, Kurahara and Young then contacted the landowner, and in 2002 the exact location in West Oahu — called Jigoku Dani or “Hell Valley” by internees — was rediscovered.

“These unsung heroes helped us connect the dots,” says Kurahara.

But the work was far from over. “We felt we needed to gather stories,” she continues.

“If there were any internees left, we needed to interview them and get their oral histories.”

By 2004, Kurahara and Young put up a work-in-progress exhibit, and the response from the community was overwhelming. During the initial reception, which also honored a handful of living internees, organizers expected fewer than 200 people to attend — but more than 400 people showed up to offer support. JCCH now is working on a Honolulu education center, slated to open this summer. Kurahara and Young also worked on outreach presentations, archaeological surveys, and they spearheaded acquisition of key archival collection manuscripts and photographs relating to internment to assist with public education.

“We’re offering outreach to the school classrooms, taking out stories and re-enactments and poetry, photos and artifacts — anything to help this part of history come alive for the kids so they can connect to it,” says Kurahara.

“I just hope that folks will learn from history and take some personal or positive action to make ours a better place,” Young adds.

For more information, call 945-7633, visit jcch.com or email info@jcch.com.

— Nicole Kato