

Pass It On®...

Wax On, Wax Off: The Pat Morita Story.

Known primarily for his role as Mr. Miyagi, Pat Morita is a mentor and a big-hearted friend who endured a difficult childhood to become a voice against racism.

Pat Morita nearly missed the opportunity that defined his professional career. He was working on and off as a stand-up comedian, barely making ends meet after a successful role in "Happy Days." When he showed up to audition for Mr. Miyagi in "The Karate Kid," producer Jerry Weintraub couldn't see the actor beyond his comedic roles and dismissed him. But Morita persisted, growing out his hair and beard. When he finally read for the part, Weintraub was sold, and the rest is history.

Morita's life was anything but easy leading up to his seminal role. At 2 years old, he was separated from his parents and languished in a hospital until he was 11 due to tuberculosis and complications. He spent most of the time in a full-body cast. When he was released, he was detained with his family in an internment camp until World War II was over. His family had to rebuild their lives, and Noriyuki Morita, nicknamed "Pat" by a priest who visited him often in the hospital, went to work to support them.

He worked his way up at Lockheed, working with engineers and programmers on missile projects before experiencing burnout. Perhaps he wanted to overthrow his heavy, dark childhood by making people laugh. Whatever the reason, Morita started working as a stand-up comedian in clubs around Sacramento and San Francisco. It was a grind. At one point, when he was out of money and prospects, comedian Redd Foxx stepped in and loaned him \$3,500. It was a godsend, but so was Foxx's friendship. Perhaps there would be no Mr. Miyagi if it weren't for the kindness of the irascible Fred Sanford.

After a few bit parts in movies, Pat landed the role of Arnold on "Happy Days." It was seemingly a role that would change his life, and it did. But Morita was typecast, and when the show ended, he couldn't find work due to his ubiquitousness as Arnold. It was at this low point that he pursued the role of Mr. Miyagi.

"The Karate Kid" allowed him to reveal a bit of who Pat Morita is: a kind and patient mentor who cares deeply about teaching kids where they come from and how to overcome their circumstances as well as their prejudices. Morita's later work focused on documentaries about the war, the sacrifices it entailed and the need to know our history so we can learn from it.

Noriyuki "Pat" Morita will always be remembered as a gentle and giving soul. His childhood and his family's incarceration could have driven him into a bitter place. But he chose to find the good in people and in his life.

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