Kansha Project Completes Successful Fourth Year

By Christine Munteanu, Assistant Program Director

JACL Chicago successfully completed the fourth year of the Kansha Project in June. This year’s ten participants were the most diverse group of the past few years, reflecting the growing diversity of the Japanese American community. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 25, came from various parts of the Midwest, represented both yonsei and shin-Nisei generations, and identified as multiracial, multiethnic, and monoracial. The group’s varied and multifaceted experiences of what it means to be Japanese American led to thought-provoking discussion around identity, community, and legacy.

Our trip to Los Angeles followed a similar itinerary to previous years, and included visits to the Go For Broke Monument and the Japanese American National Museum, where we were greeted by Greg Kimura, the museum’s CEO. Alan Nishio, long-time community

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KANSHA PROJECT PARTICIPANTS POSE IN FRONT OF THE RECONSTRUCTED SIGN AT THE ENTRANCE OF MANZANAR NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE.

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Kansha Project continued

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activist, led us on a tour of the Little Tokyo neighborhood, highlighting its history and the way the community has mobilized to preserve and protect the neighborhood’s unique legacy and character. Alan emphasized the need for an expansive and inclusive vision of the Japanese American community, themes that resonate in a more dispersed community like Chicago’s.

The program also included educational workshops that covered various aspects of the incarceration experience. A session with June Berk and Min Tonai, two former internees, delved into details of daily life in the camps. June and Min, who were both children at the time of the war, commented that while they were protected from the harshest realities of camp life, the experience was devastating for their parents. Dr. Lane Hirabyashi spoke about the long-term, generational, and psychological impacts of the incarceration, in an emotional presentation that struck a chord with many of the participants. Dr. Lily Welty returned for a third year to talk about multiracial Japanese American identity and facilitated a discussion about the future direction of the community. John Tateishi, former JACL National Director, discussed the successful redress movement and the way the community pursued justice in order to ensure that no other group of people would have to experience what the Japanese American community went through.

During our visit to Manzanar National Historic Site, a National Park Service ranger provided a guided tour of the grounds, pointing out some of the many Japanese gardens created by the internees. We also took part in a service project, helping to clear dead brush and debris along the fence line that marked the southern border of the camp. After several hours of work in the hot sun, we relaxed by kicking off our shoes and socks and wading along a small stream. The ranger explained that while the creek now rarely has any water in it, while the internees were at Manzanar, many relaxed and fished along this creek. We also got a chance to visit Manzanar’s reservoir: though now empty, it once held a million gallons of water that supplied the camp’s 10,000 residents.
Over forty community members attended the Culmination Event, where participants shared their experiences during the Kansha Project, and showcased their reflection videos. The participants’ thoughtful videos and their articulate responses to the audience’s questions highlighted the impact the program had on the participants’ sense of identity, community, and legacy.

The 2015 Kansha Project participants were: Shusaku Asai, Chika Kondo, James Meason, Aima Mori, Danny Nitahara, James Ozaki, Joy Sugihara, Michael Sugihara, Colin Wong, and Grace Yoshiba. Their reflections videos can be viewed online at the JACL Chicago website. The Kansha Project is supported by the JACL Legacy Fund Grants program, the Chicago Japanese American Council, as well as many generous community donors who have made this program possible.
Praise for Charleston’s Resilience

On Wednesday, June 17th, the nation experienced another heinous tragedy when 9 African Americans were gunned down inside the Emanuel A.M.E. church in Charleston, SC. The shooter, 21-year-old Dylan Roof, told authorities he murdered his victims in cold blood because wanted to start a race war. Included among the victims was Reverend Clementa Pinckney, pastor of the Emanuel A.M.E. for 23 years and also a South Carolina legislator.

On Friday June 19th, Roof appeared in court for the first time via video feed and listened as many of the victims’ family members came forward and made statements on the family’s behalf. Bethane Middleton Brown, representing the family of one of the victims, Rev. DePayne-Middleton-Doctor, informed the killer that as horrific of a tragedy as her family suffered, “we are the family that love built. We have no room for hate. We have to forgive.”

I want to first start off by offering my sincere condolences to the victims and their families. These kinds of mass shootings have become unfortunately almost commonplace; this is the 12th time in President Obama’s tenure that he’s had to address the nation following a massacre.

But I don’t want to draw any more attention to the suspect, I want to instead focus and praise Charleston’s resilience following the tragedy. How everyone can come together, regardless of race, and unite as one. Reinforce to the nation that we will not let one’s hate win out over us. On Sunday, June 21st, Emanuel A.M.E. had their first service following the shooting. The message to the congregation was simple; evil will not win. Later that evening, thousands gathered arm-in-arm on the iconic Arthur Ravenel Jr. Bridge and marched across in a showing of solidarity and healing. When the marchers from the two sides met in the middle, they cheered, clapped, and sang in unison.

It is demonstrations like this that show the world that even in the face of pure hatred, we will stand together. We shall overcome and we will eventually recover. We did it following Oklahoma City, we did it after 9/11, and we will do it now. No matter how bad the situation, nothing can deter us.

And while we’re at it, I also wanted to begrudgingly applaud South Carolina lawmakers for finally discussing the idea of removing the Confederate flag from Capitol property. Although it is 150 years too late, at least the topic is once again up to debate. It my personally opinion, the flag is old, outdated, and it has no place in our culture. But I will save that rant for another time…

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Over 50 community and JACL chapter members attended the 2015 Scholarship Luncheon on May 17 to celebrate the achievements of this year’s scholarship winners. Sydney Hamamoto, Ryan Kuramitsu, and Marc Oda were awarded scholarships for their outstanding academic performance and dedication to the Japanese American community.

Becky Ozaki, JACL Chicago Youth Development Committee co-chair, served as the emcee for the afternoon. This year’s keynote speaker was Josina Morita, a former JACL Chicago scholarship winner and longtime community advocate. Josina spoke about her journey in discovering and embracing her identity as a Japanese American and Asian American activist, and connected the legacy of the community’s wartime incarceration to a continued commitment to social justice and civil rights for all.

The luncheon also highlighted the Kansha Project, which is now in its fourth year. Christine Munteanu, Kansha Project coordinator, spoke about the program’s history and goals, and Mary Coomes, a 2014 Kansha Project alum, spoke about the continued connection that still exists among the program’s alumni, and introduced the Kansha Project Alumni Leadership Board initiative as a means of harnessing that sense of continued engagement to move the program to become more youth-driven and sustainable.

Finally, the program profiled and awarded this year’s three scholarship winners. The winners and their awards are listed below.

The Scholarship Luncheon remains one of JACL Chicago’s standout events for honoring the past achievements and future potential of young people in the Chicago Japanese American community and for highlighting the many ways JACL Chicago continues to support these young leaders.

JACL Chicago thanks Judy Tanaka for her leadership and dedication as the Scholarship Committee chair, and the scholarship committee for their work in administering this long-standing program of the chapter. The chapter also would like to thank the generous donors who make the scholarship program possible!

**2015 JACL Chicago Scholarship Winners**

**Todd S. Tomiyama Scholarship:**
Marc Oda, Trinity Christian College

**Hank & Mary Sakai Memorial Scholarship:**
Sydney Hamamoto, Niles West High School

**John Iwaoka Memorial Scholarship:**
Ryan Kuramitsu, McCormick Theological Seminary

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Bullying a Factor in Middle Schooler's Death
By Bill Yoshino, Midwest Regional Director

The tragic death of Emilie Grace Olsen, a Chinese American student at Fairfield Middle School in Fairfield Township, Ohio, has been troubling by the circumstances and investigation surrounding the bullying.

In a letter to parents in December 2014, Fairfield superintendent, Paul Otten stated that bullying was not a factor in Emilie's death. Since then, administrators for the Fairfield City Schools have failed to provide investigative information about the tragedy; instead, they have railed against so-called rumors and misinformation, particularly in the aftermath of a May 13, 2015 investigative report by WCPO Television, which disclosed that emails, school reports, and a social media account did indicate that Emilie was bullied.

According to the television report, Emilie's father repeatedly contacted the school to complain about his daughter's plight and even requested changes to her schedule to avoid being in classes with certain students, which the school accommodated. However, it appears that the bullying persisted and Emilie took her own life on December 11, 2014. The Fairfield City Schools have an obligation to explain their conclusion that Emilie was not bullied, just as they had an obligation to provide a safe environment for Emilie and all students.

School bullying is an unfortunate reality. JACL is very concerned by the extent of bullying directed at Asian American students. A 2013 report titled One Step Forward, Half a Step Back, issued by the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund and The Sikh Coalition, found that 50% of Asian students report being racially harassed at their schools. The report also found that Asian students are bullied at a rate 20% higher than whites and 10% higher than other groups of color. Although the report focused on New York City schools, its implications may extend to all schools with Asian American student populations.

The demographics of the Fairfield City Schools show a racial breakdown of 86.7% white, 9% black, and 1.6% Asian. Clearly, students of color can be made to feel isolated and vulnerable. There is a need for Fairfield administrators to reflect on Emilie's tragic death in the context of policies and rules about bullying that are integrated into the culture of their schools, and programs about race, diversity, and multiculturalism that are embedded in a curriculum that reaches every student, teacher, and administrator.

Kansha Project Forming Alumni Leadership Board
By Christine Munteanu, Assistant Program Director

JACL Chicago is excited to announce the new Alumni Leadership Board (ALB) initiative of the Kansha Project! The Alumni Leadership Board will leverage the continued investment and connection to the Kansha Project among its alumni to transform the Kansha Project into a sustainable, youth-driven and youth-led program.

The Alumni Leadership Board will be comprised of six to ten former Kansha Project participants, and will be supported during the first year of transition by Kansha Project program coordinator, Christine Munteanu.

ALB members will undergo skills training and a strategic planning process for the Kansha Project in order to develop a shared vision of the program’s future. Eventually, ALB members will take ownership of the Kansha Project by tailoring its curriculum, facilitating workshops, publicizing the program, recruiting and admitting participants, planning logistics, and assisting in fundraising efforts. In addition, the ALB will plan alumni engagement events for past Kansha Project participants who are not part of the ALB, in order to foster continued connection to the program and maintain interest in the program for future ALB recruitment.

The Alumni Leadership Board is supported by funding from the Asian Giving Circle and the JACL Legacy Fund Grant.

More information will be available starting in July. Stay tuned!
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Calendar of Events

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