The Kakehashi Project

The Kakehashi Project is a youth exchange program promoted by Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs to promote deeper mutual understanding among the people of Japan and the United States, enable future leaders of Japan-US exchanges to form networks, and help young people develop wider perspectives to encourage active roles at the global level in the future.

JACL developed the Japanese American Young Adult Invitation program as an international leadership development program. Today’s Japanese American youth are a part of a global community, and an understanding of international and U.S.-Japan relations is integral to their future endeavors. An extension of the JACL youth leadership development programs and of the work of the JACL U.S.-Japan Committee, the Kakehashi Project was established to facilitate cross-cultural understanding between Japanese Americans and Japanese, and to encourage a deeper understanding of U.S.-Japan relations.

Here are some reflections of the experience from recent Chicago-area participants.

The American Sticks Out

By James Ozaki

I can remember the feeling hitting me just as we were minutes away from landing at Narita Airport: I thought to myself, “Wow, I’m really in Japan!” After years of longing to see where my ancestors came from, wanting to experience the culture first hand, and utilize the Japanese language skills I had acquired for the past 5 years in school, I had made it. For free, of course — and a special thanks to JACL and JICE for making it all possible through the Kakehashi Project.

Initially, I viewed this trip to Japan as a cornerstone and a very important piece in constructing my Japanese American identity. I had always wondered how to connect back to Japan with four generations, more than half the US, and the whole Pacific Ocean separating us. What is it like being Japanese American in Japan?

So even though we might look like Japanese people, the American sticks out. I was told by one of the students from the university we visited, “When I first saw you, I thought you might be Japanese, but then you had too much confidence.”
Kakehashi Project continued

But in another instance, I met this older man who clearly had too much to drink at a ramen shop, and he asked me right away (in Japanese) if we were from China. When I told him we were American, he was a taken aback, perhaps not really equating an Asian face with being an American, but then I explained to him that we’re Japanese American, and then he said that when he sees our faces he thinks we’re Japanese.

From what I’ve gathered, there doesn’t seem to be a huge awareness of Japanese Americans’ existence in Japan. And so something I wish I could’ve done more, or maybe do in the future, is to just share with Japanese people about Japanese Americans, especially since in my Japanese class I wrote a paper about Japanese Americans so I knew the terminology.

But one of my favorite parts was being able to sing some Japanese songs for the university students and for our host family parties. I really enjoy singing in Japanese, and being able to bring together two things that are so important to me was great. But next time I go to Japan, I want to go as a singer (my secret dream). I need to go as my whole self, not just isolating pieces of my identity. If there’s one thing I learned from this trip, it’s that there’s a whole world out there, but only one me. The Kakehashi Project has raised more questions about myself, yet opened new paths challenging me to build my place in the world.

A Bridge to Tomorrow
By Lisa Doi

Part of the Kakehashi experience was a brief home stay, one day and two nights. With my host family, I visited Kushida Shrine, a large Shinto shrine in Fukuoka. As we were navigating the grounds, the Disneyland of shrines replete with mini-shrines, dining, shopping, and two museums, our hostess pointed out a bridge. Broken into three parts, a small bridge led onto a main bridge and repeated a small bridge, our hostess explained that the bridge represented time: the past, the present, and the future, so if you crossed the bridge, you shouldn’t cross back.

I had been thinking a lot about bridges and time throughout the trip. The Kakehashi program is described as a “bridge to tomorrow,” where participants strengthen economic and social bonds between Japan and the United States. It was clear the kinds of bridges we were to build: we visited the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to learn about Prime Minister Abe’s “women-nomics,” we were introduced to Fukuoka by a JET participant, and we ended the trip with a visit to IBM Japan. These were the bridges to tomorrow that the Japan International Cooperation Center imagined.

However, the interesting thing about bringing a group of Nikkei to Japan is that it is as much about a bridge to tomorrow as a bridge to yesterday. Most of our connections
to Japan were rooted not in a 21st century imagination, but in a 20th century departure. We took a trip to Yokohama to visit the Japan Overseas Migration Museum, where we learned about the history of Japanese emigration, and we participated in a workshop at a Noh theater. These tensions between the past and the present were, ultimately, what made Kakehashi most engaging. This temporal tug colors not only US-Japan relations, but also the Japanese American community. As a community, largely rooted in a historic identity of trauma and triumph, how do we imagine an evolving future?

Both domains, the national and the international, demand that the past and the future be folded into the present; require multidirectional travel. The beauty of the Kushida bridge is that as you stood in the middle, in the present, you can wade backwards into the past and forwards into the future as you see fit. The challenge is to navigate this path without finding the point of no return, falling off the bridge to tomorrow.

Lisa Doi (bottom left) poses with other Kakehashi participants

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Best Cultural Lessons Came From My Host Family

By Lane Mita

Going to Japan on the Kakehashi Project was definitely a life changing experience. It was my first time going to Japan, and I was able to learn a lot about my cultural background and identity. A majority of the participants that went on the trip were also Yonsei, or fourth generation Japanese Americans. One thing that I can say for sure was that the language barrier was definitely a worry that was on all of our minds. Thankfully, all the Japanese tour guides from the Japanese International Cooperation Center (JICE) spoke English well. I was also thankful that my host father spoke English well, since the rest of my host family could not speak English.

I would like to highlight things that made the trip special to me. The food was just as delicious as I had imagined! I savored every meal, from the authentic Japanese ramen to extensive dinner platters like shabu-shabu that included of every type of domestic Japanese vegetable. My time with my host family probably gave me some of the best cultural lessons and brought out some of the history of the Fukuoka region. My host father told us folktales about Fukuoka and the neighboring town, Hakata, explaining how they were a great joint cultural exchange port because they are so close to China and the Korean Peninsula. On our last night together, my host family took me and my roommate up into the mountains to go to an onsen, or hot springs resort. I had started getting sick due to lack of sleep and time difference, so this experience definitely rounded off my trip perfectly.

Unfortunately, the language barrier ended up being the downside to my experience in Japan. Although we were without a doubt treated very well by the tour guides and those helping out with the program, it seemed that anyone outside the program categorized us as Americans or as outsiders instead of Japanese. I think what brought me back to reality on this trip was when walking with four other Yonsei participants around the streets of Shibuya and Shinjuku. Promoters for clubs and events would not come near us. This didn’t matter much to me, but you would clearly see them go up to every other pedestrian around us, so it seemed obvious that they were avoiding us. When we tried to enter a bar because it looked empty, we were denied entrance because we were told, “Only Japanese talk,” I believe this is a problem that all Japanese Americans that can’t speak Japanese can run into, I think there is a negative connotation that comes along with being an outsider, or at least someone that doesn’t speak Japanese.

I would be worried about these types of encounters in the future, and it does concern me for Japanese Americans that are caught unaware of this outlook that some Japanese may have. But that one night didn’t change my overall positive experience and outlook of Japan, and I still would like go back to Japan because I had a great time.
Reflections of Kansha, Too!

By Aisha Ghori Ozaki

As an Asian Muslim woman raised in the United States, I generally believe myself to be aware, connected, and committed to ensuring that I do what I can to give back and contribute to society at large. In fact, both personally and professionally, I have regularly fought the systems in place by looking for ways to break stereotypes and biases. As such, it was with great pride that I decided to participate in the Kansha, Too! program. Having married into a JA family, my knowledge of the incarceration of JA’s in the US had grown over the years through research, community engagement, and occasionally gentle prodding of my in-laws. And, despite all this, my awe and amazement of those who were corralled and imprisoned was only heightened by the experience of Kansha, Too!.

The trip culminated in an immersive visit to Manzanar, the first of the concentration camps located in a desolate and deserted area several hours away from the heart of Los Angeles. Although the camp had been destroyed, through the efforts of the JA community, a museum and a partial recreation allows visitors to obtain a glimpse into the obstacles and daily lives of those who were held within the confines of barbed wire and armed watch towers.

While we sat in the mess hall eating our boxed lunches, I felt an eerie sense of guilt; the comfort with which I enjoyed my meal was in sharp contrast to the experiences of those who were forcibly imprisoned in numerous concentration camps around the US.

As I watched those who moved more slowly, I was reminded of how hard it must have been for those who were ill, older, or juggling children while facing extreme weather (high heat, wind, or other elements). My admiration grew further.

And, the frustration with the nation I was born into that forcibly subjected thousands of JA’s to imprisonment grew even further.

As I comfortably perused the gift shop for tokens to share with my children and friends, I knew that for me, this experience could not end here. My voice would work to share the history to ensure that the time and stories of those JA’s who were imprisoned would not be in vain.

As we returned from Kansha, Too!, we found ourselves faced with anti-Muslim political rhetoric which began to espouse some familiar notions for the JA community who immediately stood up and combated these efforts. It is with pride and gratitude that I stand with my JA family and community as we enter into a period in history where we can never forget the experience of the past of those who endured such horrors with grace and dignity. It is my hope and prayer to inspire the next generation to carry on the legacy of their grandparents by standing up against injustices and serving as a voice against those who oppress.
Kansha Participants Enjoy Reunion
By Mari Yamagiwa, JACL Chicago Americorps VISTA

At the beginning of the new year, the Kansha Alumni Leadership Board’s Alumni Engagement committee organized a Kansha Project reunion for all the past participants. About 20 alumni gathered at Range in Lincoln Park to eat, drink, and catch up with one another. There were past participants from each year of the Kansha Project there — from the first Kansha Project group from 2012, to the most recent group that participated in the program this past summer.

Many alumni that live or attend school out of state were home for the holidays. It was really great to see old friends and to catch up, but also to get to know other alumni that I have not met before. For me, it felt like a family reunion. There was a sense of familiarity and I believe The Kansha Project experience is something that still brings us together.

We will continue to have Kansha Project reunions periodically. My hope is that our group will continue to stay in touch and remain connected with one another moving forward! 🤗

Kansha Project Alumni Leadership Board Kicks off their Fundraising Campaign!
By Aima Mori, Alumni Leadership Board member

2016 is a milestone year for the Kansha Project: it marks not only the fifth cycle of program participants, but also the formation of the Alumni Leadership Board (ALB). In an effort to create a self-sustaining program, leadership of the Kansha Project is now transitioning to a group of volunteer alumni that will oversee all aspects of planning, fundraising, and community outreach. To celebrate five years of success and this exciting new change, the ALB has launched a fundraising campaign with a goal to raise $15,000 for the Kansha Project by this summer.

We hope to see you again on Saturday, June 18th, for the Kansha Project Culmination, which is the capstone event of the year and the end of our fundraising campaign. The program will showcase all of ALB’s accomplishments, and the newest Kansha Project participants will be there to share their experiences at Manzanar and Little Tokyo. Please mark your calendars and stay tuned for more details! 📅
Standing Room Only at 2016 Day of Remembrance
By Christine Munteanu, Assistant Program Director

Over 250 people attended Chicago’s successful Day of Remembrance on Sunday, February 21 at the Chicago History Museum. This year’s featured speaker was Dr. Mitchell Maki, who led the audience through the fascinating journey of the Redress Movement.

Dr. Maki is vice provost of Academic Affairs at California State University, Dominguez Hills. He is the lead author of the award-winning book *Achieving the Impossible Dream: How Japanese Americans Obtained Redress*, a detailed case study of the passage of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988. Dr. Maki highlighted the courage and voice of the Japanese American community in uniting in order to achieve justice and equality and uphold the Constitutional rights of the community.

This year’s program was emceed by Rebecca Ozaki and Anna Takada. The Chicago Nisei Post no. 1183 Color Guard posted the colors, and Ryan Sasaki read excerpts from the removal poster. The event also featured a short preview of the film *Right of Passage* by Janice Tanaka.

Prior to the main event, Dr. Maki also met with a group of approximately 30 young people from the community for a question and answer session over brunch. The more intimate setting allowed for an in-depth exploration of the Redress Movement, and attendees had the opportunity to imagine their own personal reactions to injustice.

This year’s DOR committee was chaired by JASC’s Legacy Center Manager Ryan Yokota. The Day of Remembrance is sponsored by the Chicago Japanese American Council, the Chicago Japanese American Historical Society, the Chicago Mutual Aid Society, the Japanese American Citizens League – Chicago Chapter, and the Japanese American Service Committee.

Photos: Robert Brown
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SAVE-THE-DATE
Kansha Project Culmination
Saturday, June 18th
Skokie Banquet and Conference Center
5300 W. Touhy, Skokie, IL
Tickets: $30 regular, $20 youth/student
### Calendar of Events

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<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday, March 9</td>
<td><strong>JACL Chicago Board Meeting</strong></td>
<td>JACL Chicago Office, 5415 N. Clark Street, Chicago</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saturday, March 19</td>
<td><strong>2016 JACL Chicago Inaugural</strong></td>
<td>Midwest Buddhist Temple, 435 W Menomonee St, Chicago</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday, April 14</td>
<td><strong>JACL Chicago Board Meeting</strong></td>
<td>JACL Chicago Office, 5415 N. Clark Street, Chicago</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sunday, May 22</td>
<td><strong>JACL Chicago Scholarship Luncheon</strong></td>
<td>Maggiano’s Little Italy, 4999 Old Orchard Shopping Center, Skokie, IL</td>
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<td>Saturday, June 18</td>
<td><strong>Kansha Project Culmination</strong></td>
<td>Skokie Banquet and Conference Center, 5300 W. Touhy, Skokie, IL</td>
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