

# Reconnecting with the Past, Forging Our Future



L to R: Ambassador T. Henry Shimanouchi, Irene Hirano, Senator Daniel K. Inouye, and Henry Ota at the groundbreaking ceremonies for the Japanese American National Museum's Historic Building, held July 20–21, 1990.

**THE THEME OF THE** Japanese American National Museum's 2017 Gala Dinner, *Reconnecting with the Past, Forging Our Future*, captures the duality faced by all organizations that are rooted in history even as they must secure their own future. In honoring JANM's founding president Bruce Kaji, JANM's inaugural executive director and president/CEO Irene Hirano Inouye, and Densho founding executive director and former member of JANM's Board of Governors Tom Ikeda, the museum recognizes the contributions that enabled this institution to make Japanese American history relevant for each new generation.

Much has been accomplished so far. After 25 years of organizing groundbreaking exhibitions, insightful public programs, stimulating documentaries, and empowering collaborations, JANM has helped to define and expand the history of Japanese Americans in a manner that resonates both nationally and internationally. Certainly, more individuals today understand the significance of the Japanese American World War II experience

than ever before. Such an awakening was one of the goals for the museum when it was founded.

The Japanese American World War II experience is varied, with still many more aspects to be examined, as the museum has helped to reveal. In sum, 75 years ago, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, the first falling legal domino that triggered a cascade of collapsing civil liberties that landed without compassion on thousands of innocent people of Japanese ancestry. The litany of indignities—including the loss of homes and businesses, incarceration without due process, and false accusations of treason and espionage—was endured with a silent dignity that was culturally both protective and restrictive for those who lived through it. While this complicated series of events included unparalleled heroism on the battlefield, skewed decisions in the courts, and the methodical rebuilding of Japanese American communities after the war, many of those most adversely affected chose not to dwell on or share their experiences with even their own families. Compounding the obscuring

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of history, most of the perpetrators of this blatant discrimination against one group offered a false postwar narrative to hide the fact that a democratic nation failed to protect the rights of a minority and to live up to its Constitution.



L to R: Bruce T. Kaji, George Aratani, Col. Young Oak Kim, Henry Ota, and Ambassador T. Henry Shimanouchi at the public opening in 1992.

Kaji was among the first to consider the idea of forming a museum to ensure that a true history would be established. An accountant and real estate developer who helped to found one of the first Japanese American banks, Merit Savings and Loan Association, in the 1960s, Kaji was well suited to organize such a venture. He grew up in Boyle Heights, one of the few multicultural neighborhoods in Los Angeles. During the war, he and his family were forced to live in the government-run Manzanar concentration camp; he graduated from high school there and was later drafted into the US Army, becoming a member of the Military Intelligence Service (MIS) during the Occupation of Japan.

Kaji and his Merit Savings group had the expertise to create a physical structure to house a museum as part of a real estate development. But who would create the content? Fortunately, Kaji's

friends—World War II veterans Col. Young Oak Kim, Buddy Mamiya, Robert Hayamizu, and Harry Yamamoto—had helped to organize an exhibition on the Nisei soldier, which was installed at Patriot Hall in downtown Los Angeles. When the show closed, the artifacts they had collected needed a home, so the veterans became partners in the new museum project.

The Japanese American National Museum was incorporated in 1985 and made great strides over the next two years. The fledgling institution secured a lease with the City of the Los Angeles through its Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) to use the former Nishi Hongwanji Buddhist Temple building in Little Tokyo as its site. With pledged monetary support from the CRA and the State of California through State Senator Art Torres, the museum was positioned to become a reality.

While facility issues and fundraising challenges remained, philosophical questions also needed attention. What kind of museum would this be and who would be expected to visit? Clearly, the early organizers recognized that their families were ignorant of and indifferent to their own histories. But was a community museum sufficient?



In July 1988, the City of Los Angeles's Community Redevelopment Agency presented Irene Hirano and Bruce Kaji with a check for \$1.75 million to help fund renovation of the Historic Building.

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Nancy Araki, Irene Hirano, and Bruce T. Kaji at the JANM Annual Meeting in April 1988. The meeting was the first in which Hirano participated.

According to Nancy Araki, JANM's first employee, Kaji understood that the best way to prevent any other group from suffering a similar tragic fate was to embed the Japanese American World War II experience into mainstream United States history. And to help do that, the Japanese American National Museum needed as many Americans as possible to visit and learn.

Kaji also contributed to the hiring of the museum's first executive director, Irene Hirano (as she was known before her marriage to US Senator Daniel K. Inouye). While the museum had already engaged Araki to work full time on getting the institution off the ground and had retained its first curator, Akemi Kikumura, to develop an exhibition on the Issei generation, it still required someone to lead the organization forward. According to Kaji, he offered the position to Hirano, who was then running the T.H.E. (To Help Everyone) Clinic, but she refused—several times. Kaji was convinced that Hirano was the right person and persisted. In 1988, Hirano finally agreed and became the institution's first executive director.

Her installation began a series of new developments to provide for the institution's growth. For one, the museum's leadership, with Kaji's approval,

evolved from a mostly Southern California-based Board of Trustees to a truly national one. Individuals like Siegfried Kagawa of Hawai'i; Noby Yamakoshi of Chicago; Elaine Yamagata of Texas; William Marumoto of Washington, DC; Francis Sogi of New York; Yoshihiro Uchida of San Jose; and George Azumano of Portland joined local members such as George Aratani, George Takei, Manabi Hirasaki, and Kei Higashi, among others. Planning also extended farther into the future, as the board, while still raising funds for the renovation of the Historic Building, added a Phase II campaign to construct a modern building that would become the Pavilion.

Hirano also helped to recruit James Hirabayashi, the former dean of San Francisco State University's Ethnic Studies Department—the first such depart-



L to R: Manabi Hirasaki, Irene Hirano, and George Aratani, 1989. Hirasaki and Aratani were early members of JANM's Board of Trustees.

ment in the country. An anthropologist, Hirabayashi would direct the museum's program staff to emphasize the first-person point of view to document historic events. Few other institutions or scholars at the time relied on this method, but as JANM found in its exhibitions and documentaries, it is clearly a way to make history more accessible to more people. Famed filmmaker Ken Burns (honored by JANM at its 2016 Gala Dinner), who has utilized the



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museum's collection for his documentaries *The War*, *The Roosevelts: An Intimate History*, and *The National Parks: America's Best Idea*, demonstrates the strength of the first-person voice in all his pieces.

Hirano was instrumental in setting the tone when the museum faced its first real crisis. As JANM was preparing to open the doors to its renovated Historic Building in Little Tokyo in 1992, much of Los Angeles was in turmoil. After years of planning, preparing, organizing, and fundraising, the museum had scheduled its dedication for April 30, 1992. Over 1,200 chairs had been arranged in the nearby parking lot facing a stage with room for 50 dignitaries. But the original plans for an outdoor dedication were abandoned because on April 29, the first Rodney King trial ended in acquittal and civil unrest erupted throughout the city.

Indeed, JANM staff and volunteers could hear the blaring sirens as a convoy of police cars raced to Parker Center, then-headquarters of the LA Police Department, only one block away. A crowd had



Architects James McElwain and Yoshio Nishimoto lead Senator Daniel K. Inouye, Irene Hirano, and others on a hard-hat tour of the Historic Building in 1991.

gathered in protest and a parking kiosk was set on fire. This was an era when information moved more slowly, but eventually, the grim situation

unfolded on television, with episodes of vandalism and violence and clashes between different communities chronicled as they happened. It soon became clear to museum leadership that no one could sit in those chairs on April 30.



Irene Hirano speaking to guests at the closed dedication ceremony on April 30, 1992, in the Historic Building's Legacy Center.

Under Hirano's and Araki's leadership, the museum displayed several traits that would demonstrate its core values. Having accepted that its original plans were impossible, but concerned for the many invited out-of-town guests who could not be expected to return at a later date, the museum shifted gears. It moved its dedication indoors to its Legacy Center, the former social hall of the temple. Somehow, 400 people jammed into the space, with a large contingent of Japanese media who were there to cover former Japanese Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu's speech.

Hirano used the occasion to promote the institution's broader mission. As she noted: "The disturbances in Los Angeles were distressing to all of us and point up the need for continued education, multicultural understanding, and stronger linkages between ethnic communities in the United States, and between the US and other countries. In many ways, it has strengthened our commitment and

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The first person to enter the officially opened museum doors, Katsumi Mukaeda, 101-year-old Honorary Chairman, with Bruce Kaji, Irene Hirano, and Senator Art Torres.

efforts to carry out the mission of the museum and has reconfirmed our belief that an institution like the museum be visible and strong.”

While a citywide curfew forced the postponement of the gala dinner, an abbreviated National Japanese American Symposium was still held on May 1. The symposium featured two major panel discussions: “Building Inter-ethnic Bridges” and “Building Bridges with Japan.” The former was a continuation of Kaji’s inclusive attitude along with the cooperative spirit that both Hirano and Araki encouraged. When the museum held its public opening on May 15, it invited representatives from institutions such as the Bilingual Foundation of the Arts, California Afro-American Museum, Hebrew Union College Skirball Museum, Inner City Cultural Center, Plaza de la Raza, Southwest Museum, and Watts Towers Arts Center, among many others, as part of the museum’s “Hand in Hand” initiative in response to the civil strife between communities.

The latter panel of the symposium emphasized the importance of nurturing a long-term relationship with Japan, exemplified by the major donation of almost \$10 million by Keidanren (Japan Business Federation) to build the Pavilion. Much of that effort was made by Sony co-founder Akio Morita, who saw the museum as a vital bridge between

Japan and America. Over time, a parade of Japanese dignitaries would visit JANM, including Prime Ministers Keizo Obuchi and Shinzo Abe and Their Imperial Majesties, the Emperor and Empress of Japan. Eventually, Hirano would help to organize an



“Hand in Hand” participants from various museums and cultural organizations joined in the ribbon-cutting celebration at JANM’s public opening in 1992.

annual Japanese American Leadership Delegation (JALD) to Japan, where young leaders would meet and interact. That initiative would become one of the core programs of the U.S.-Japan Council, which Hirano Inouye heads today. Relations between Japan and Japanese American communities have never been closer in the postwar era.



1992 reception in honor of Sony co-founder Akio Morita (center). Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley is on his left.

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Hirano also worked constantly to give the museum a national presence. During her 20-year tenure, JANM was one of the few local institutions to be accredited by the American Association of Museums (now the American Alliance of Museums). JANM also became an official affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution, which has allowed



Irene Hirano leads Their Imperial Majesties, the Emperor and Empress of Japan, on a tour of JANM's inaugural *Issei Pioneers* exhibition in 1994.

it to present Smithsonian exhibitions, including one of Isamu Noguchi's ceramics and another focusing on objects and stories from September 11.

While Ikeda was not directly involved in the formation and development of the Japanese American National Museum, he has served as a member of the museum's Board of Governors. In 2012, he made a presentation to the museum's Board of Trustees that laid out a challenge. As Ikeda explained, the ways people will learn about history in the future will be markedly different from what they are today. This was a lesson he learned while working at Microsoft's Multimedia Publishing Group in Seattle. He had approached a company that published encyclopedias and asked if they would be interested in providing their content on a new platform called the Internet. The company declined because they had been so successful publishing books for years and felt no reason to change. A few years later, the company went out of business.



Tom Ikeda, right, interviews Mrs. Sakaye Aratani earlier this year for the Densho video life history project.

There were two lessons in Ikeda's story. First, in this day and age, technology is changing very fast and every organization needs to change with it. Second, if an organization thinks it is too well established and doesn't need to change, it will fail.

Ikeda left Microsoft. After participating in a Nisei oral history project, he realized that the trauma Japanese Americans endured during the war was substantial and lingering. The silent dignity that so many Japanese Americans naturally invoked to handle the humiliation of the war had also inhibited them from articulating their own emotions. Ikeda wanted to share the stories he had heard to help "ease the feelings of rejection, unwanted shame, and sadness."

In 1996, he became the founding Executive Director of Densho: The Japanese American Legacy Project, located in Seattle. In the 20 years since, Ikeda has personally conducted 220 interviews, which are made available through the Densho website (which, by the way, includes an encyclopedia of Japanese American history with a special focus on the World War II experience). "Densho became a space for the Nisei to share deeply about what they were told to forget, and to be reminded that their stories mattered," observed Ikeda, another advocate for first-person accounts of history.



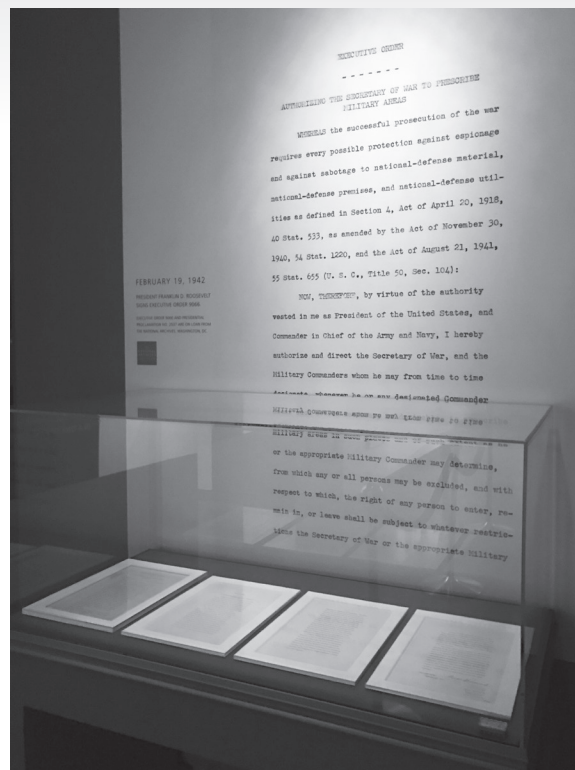
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Today, both the Japanese American National Museum and Densho have chosen to speak out publicly when current events appear reminiscent of the racist climate during World War II. Ikeda in particular utilizes social media for rapid responses to current events. JANM made public statements after the September 11 tragedies and in December 2016, it released a statement when the subject of a Muslim registry made headline news. Ann Burroughs, then JANM's Interim President and CEO, was quoted as follows:

“Perhaps never before has the museum’s mission to promote understanding and appreciation of America’s diversity by sharing the Japanese American experience been more important. The frightening rhetoric currently taking place pushes us to redouble our efforts to educate those willing to learn and recommit ourselves to standing in solidarity with the Muslim American community. We will do the same if and when any other group finds itself similarly targeted by our own government, something that few groups did when Japanese Americans were targeted in the 1940s.”

On February 18, 2017, one day before the 75th anniversary of the signing of Executive Order 9066, JANM opened a new show, *Instructions to All Persons: Reflections on Executive Order 9066*. This timely exhibition, on view through August 13, 2017, provides the historic lessons that both Kaji and Hirano wanted to share with all Americans to help prevent a repeat of a grievous error. It has been a reference for Ikeda to rally others to speak up today. It's one way the Japanese American National Museum makes the past seem not so distant and far away and why the contributions of the three honorees are more relevant than ever to American democracy today.

*This essay was authored by Chris Komai, who worked at the Japanese American National Museum from 1991 to 2012.*



*Instructions to All Persons: Reflections on Executive Order 9066, on view through August 13, 2016, includes pages from the original Executive Order 9066 and Presidential Proclamation 2537, on loan from the National Archives through May 21 only.*