JCCNC TURNS 50
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Spotlight
At ‘The Center’ of San Francisco’s J-Town

By TOMO HIRAI
Nichii Be News

Among the many nonprofits in San Francisco’s Japantown that were founded 50 years ago as the Redevelopment Agency moved in on the ethnic enclave to enact the community’s second era of mass removal, the Japanese Cultural and Community Center of Northern California, also known as “The Center,” stands out as a gathering place intersecting with much of the community.

“It’s aptly named,” said Linda Miura, owner of neighboring Paper Tree. “It really is the cornerstone of the community, and it has been for all the past generations that have been, all the way from the Issei to currently.”

Gathering Space for Community

Conceived in the 1960s during the outset of the redevelopment era of Japantown, the community center incorporated in 1973 was part of a Redevelopment Agency-initiated effort to adhere to community needs following a lawsuit by the Western Addition Community Organization. Dean Ito Taylor, executive director of Asian Pacific Islander Legal Outreach, said the founding of ethnic studies, anti-war movements and the new conceptions of Asian and Japanese American identities inspired many of the organizations now celebrating their 50th year today, but the community lacked a gathering space.

“We had individual service providers taking care of essential services that we saw were lacking for Japanese and Asians in general, but people needed to gather and take pride in the community,” Ito Taylor said. “So leave it to the Nisei to kickstart the thing into action, right? Because it took money and everybody else was worried about supporting their nonprofits and their nonprofit services. I think almost everybody who was working in Japantown or a nonprofit, or one of the churches, was somehow involved. They were involved by word of mouth, or volunteering, or on the board, or fundraising or whatever. It was an idea that really brought people together, because it wasn’t a political thing, it was more of a community issue.”

Ito Taylor said his organization, then known as Nihonmachi Legal Outreach, as well as Kimochi, Inc., helped secure federal and state funds for the community center’s construction using Nisei’s status as a nonprofit serving low-income people and Kimochi’s status as a senior service organization. After building and completing the first phase of the JCCCNC in 1986, Ito Taylor said a number of organizations rented office space in the community center, including his organization. The organization’s leadership, however, felt it was necessary to do more than just be a rental space.

Paul Osaki has helmed the JCCCNC as its executive director for 33 years. He initially only planned to stay for a year after being hired as the organization’s inaugural program director in 1988.

“There were no programs here. And there were really no rentals or events happening here,” Osaki said. “The only thing that was really there was all these offices used to be leased to different nonprofit organizations. So there was The- ater Yugen, there was Nobirukai, there was NLO, there was JAM — Japantown Art & Media, of course, Kimochi, and they were mainly admin offices. So when I came in, the board wanted to start to see more programs, activities here, rentals, things to bring people into the center.”

Osaki, whose father, Wayne Osaki, designed the JCCCNC as its architect, said he was moved to stay to support the Nisei who believed in the community center’s vision; a place that was owned and funded by the Japanese American community.

“They wanted a place for the community … where they can have those kinds of activities, but it’d be a place that we owned and could never be taken away from us again. That was really their big goal, and so my promise to them was that I was going to make sure that was going to happen,” Osaki said.

That vision, however, was eas- ily said than done. Osaki said the community center took money and the building’s gym would not be completed until April of 1990. The JCCCNC, Osaki said, with no track record of fundrais- ing at the time, arranged a special loan package with Union Bank, Sumitomo Bank and San- wa Bank to fund its mortgage.

“If we didn’t raise the money, they would have to foreclose on the center, right? Which they would never do. So they did a consolidated loan package with the three banks, which is really unusual, but that way, no one bank would have to take the hit in case something happened,” Osaki said.

For the community, especially its Nisei, however, believed in the JCCCNC. Osaki said the community center had nearly 1,300 paid members when he first started, and their contributions and additional fundraising helped burn their 30-year mortgage in just 10 years in 1996.

Since then, Osaki said the community center has expanded its programs and efforts. Taking to heart the Nisei’s wishes to stay self-sufficient, Osaki said his organiza- tion supports itself through lease income, fundraising, program and class fees, rental fees and mem- bership fees. Around 1,000 people are members today.

“So people are members here for basically three or four reasons. One is to support the Center. One is because they want to be part of our community, and the other reason is because they believe in our cause, and what we’re doing. And then there’s a small percentage that join because they get discounts on classes or percentage off restaurants and stuff,” Osaki said. “We have people that have been members for a long time, or new members, who will never set foot into the Center, but they continue to support us because they believe in us for different reasons, and a lot of them, I think it’s just to be part of a community.”

Program Development

Even with the stalwart support, however, Osaki said it is difficult to keep things running. The community center is open from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. on weekdays and 9 a.m. to 11 p.m. on weekends with a staff of about 10 people.

“It’s ideal for us with so few staff. No, it’s stressful, right? But we have to be if we really want to be a community center serving all the different constituencies,” he said. The community center has since become a centrally located community space, serving young and old. From picnicking to mahjong, the organization welcomed close to 2,000 people through its doors each year, including young families.

Erika Tamura, program director of youth development at the Japa- nese Community Youth Council, said the JCCCNC became the site of their Halloween Carnival after it outgrew their Pine Street location, and many of their programs, such as the Tomodachi Summer Pro- gram and Kodomo no Hi celebra- tion in May. For Scott Osakumori, president board of the JCCCNC, these programs have become an opportunity to re-engage with the Japanese American community.

“When I was a kid, I did a lot of sports at the center, and a lot of Boy Scout activities,” he said. “When I became an adult and started my career, I was basically downtown. I didn’t get to Japantown much, and I didn’t have a lot of things that were there for me, like Kodomo no Hi and the Halloween festival.”

Beyond the Japantown community, Osaki said he spearheaded efforts to form the California Japanese American Community Leadership Council, which helped organize the annual Nikkei Com- munity Internship program, which takes place in the three historic California Japantowns. He also established grassroots relationships with Japanese org- anizations through the Shizen Basketball program, which Ito Taylor’s own son had taken part in for multiple years, both as a player and an assistant coach.

“I think the Center really made our family and my son, in par- ticular, focus on his heritage,” Ito Taylor said. “We wanted to expose him to his heritage, both in terms of being Japanese American, but also part of the Japantown community. … The community center gave him an opportunity to experience both.”

Lori Matoba, deputy director of the JCCCNC, said she took part in the first Shinzen exchange as a coach for the girls team in 1998.

“For many of them, it was their first time to experience Japan, so to see the differences and commonalities between their life as a Japanese American and a person in Japan,” she said.

Osaki said he initially organized (continued on page 12)
Japanese Cultural and Community Center of Northern California

The celebration of our 50th Anniversary is a tribute to the vision of the Nisei and the thousands of donors, members, volunteers, community individuals and organizations, all of whom made this milestone a reality. The Center was built upon the foundation of many dreams for generations past, present, and those yet to come, who will write new chapters for our Center and the community. - With deep gratitude, from the Board and Staff of the Center

1973 — The Center incorporated as a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization. 1980 — "Vision 80s," the $3 million capital campaign led by Mayor Dianne Feinstein and Yori Wada begins. As membership grows to 1200 members, over $1 million is raised through grassroots fundraising, public and private contributions, and individual giving. 1984 — Community groundbreaking ceremony held on October 5. 1986 — Center opens its doors to the community. Construction on the first phase of the building completed. 1990 — The second phase of the Center is completed, and an open house is held to present the Nisei Community Hall (gymnasium). 1994 — Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko of Japan visit the Center.

The Kristi Yamaguchi Goodwill Tour to Japan helps strengthen relations and raise awareness of Japanese American achievements in Japan. 1995 — Earthquake strikes the Osaka-Kobe area of Japan. The Center raises over $600,000 in direct relief funds for victims of the tragedy and sends five tons of relief goods to Japan. 1996 — The Henri and Tomoye Takahashi gift of $500,000 leads the fundraising campaign to retire Center’s mortgage.

1997 — Celebrating the 40th Anniversary of the San Francisco-Osaka Sister City relationship, the Center leads more than 300 youth, business, civic and community leaders to Japan, including the inaugural trip of the Shinzen Nikkei Youth Goodwill Program. 2000 — The Center organizes the Nikkei 2000 Conference, the first national gathering of Japanese American communities in the United States. The three day conference was attended by over 500 individuals, including citizens from Canada, Japan and South America. The Center helped organize the inaugural Japanese American Leadership Delegation to Japan, now administered in Washington, DC. 2002 — Japanese American Sports Hall of Fame honors five individuals: Wat Misaka, Ann Kiyomura Hayashi, Tommy Kono, Kristi Yamaguchi and Wally Yonamine, at Pacific Bell Park. Convenes the first Japanese American Cultural Centers Summit and the 45th Anniversary of the S.F.-Osaka Sister City Relationship, bringing S.F. 49ers to Osaka. 2005 — The Center organizes the California Nisei High School Diploma Project, and more than 1,500 Nisei received their diplomas during High School commencement ceremonies throughout the State. The Center organizes the California Japantown Landmark Project, a permanent outdoor historic monument in the three-remaining historic Japantowns (San Francisco, San Jose and Los Angeles).

2008 — The Center receives the Preserve America Community designation for Japantown awarded by the White House. 2009 — The Center organized the Nisei College Diploma Project, which assisted California colleges and universities in honoring over 900 Nisei who could not receive their college diplomas during WWII due to E.O. 9066. 2011 — The Northern Japan Earthquake Relief Fund (NUERF) was established to aid the victims and survivors of the disaster in the Tohoku region of Japan. Over $4.2 million is raised. Inaugural trip of the Takahashi Youth Ambassador Fellowship Program, a youth leadership exchange to Japan.

2015 — The Center honors World Champion San Francisco Giants baseball stars Norichika “Nori” Aoki and Travis Ishikawa. 2020 — The Center closed its doors for 417 days due to Covid. Over eight months, the Center hosted 96 online programs with 950 virtual participants from 35 states and registrants from Australia, Canada, India, Japan, Italy, and the United Kingdom.

2023

The Center celebrates its 50th Anniversary "Celebrating Generations."
Johnny's talent agency admits sexual abuse by founder, head resigns

TOKYO (Kyodo) — The niece of Johnny Kitagawa said Sept. 7 she has stepped down as president of Johnny & Associates Inc., Japan’s top male talent agency, over her late uncle’s acknowledgment he sexually abused aspiring teenage pop singers for decades.

A conference held by the agency since the allegations were widely reported by the media earlier this year, Julie Osaki, 56, said, said she would remain as a representative director “to fulfill my responsibility of providing redress for the victims.”

Noriyuki Higashiyama, 56, a veteran TV personality long represented by the agency, widely known as Johnny’s, had said he had taken over as president after Fujishima’s resignation on Sept. 6. Higashiyama is said to may take a long time to gain the trust lost due to the deep mental and physical wounds Mr. Kitagawa inflicted on his victims, but I am willing to dedicate the rest of my life to addressing this issue,” Higashiyama said, adding he would quit showbiz by the end of this year.

Kitagawa was one of the Japanese entertainment industry’s most powerful figures, propelling pop phenomena such as Kenjiro Tetsuo and Arashi to stardom before his death in 2019.

While he was able to sidestep allegations of abuse for decades, raising suspicions of organized complicity and cover-ups within the agency. As the lessons they learned in the disarray from the financial collapse, the organization — by training he is a Californian” cultural and community center. He went on to say the norm and many younger Sansei don’t necessarily have the skills yet.”

Mainstream Japanese media refrained from reporting the allegations, apparently due to the long-standing relationships that many outlets have with the agency. Performers represented by the agency are widely used on television shows and by advertisers.

The acknowledgment of Kitagawa’s actions by Fujishima and Hiroyuki Fujita, his son, came just over a week after an external probe set up by the agency concluded it had concealed the late founder’s sexual abuse that occurred from the early 1970s through to the mid-2010s. The probe’s report into operations at the company recommended Fujishima stand down over concerns her family ties would compromise organizational attractiveness as the lessons they learned in the disarray from the financial collapse.

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