

The Significance of Strengthening Ties with Nikkei in America

By TARO KONO
FOREIGN AFFAIRS MINISTER
OF JAPAN



Japan House Los Angeles commemorated its grand opening on Friday, Aug. 24, at Hollywood & Highland and opens all of its doors to the general public on Saturday. The second-floor gallery and retail shop, which opened December 2017, have already welcomed 78,000-plus visitors. These spaces have drawn in visitors with the presentation of attractive and creative content suited to local interests.

The latest completion of a restaurant, library and multi-purpose event space on the fifth floor will enable Japan House Los Angeles to showcase the best of Japan in earnest, including its food culture, as well as policies and initiatives, through a wide range of activities and offerings.

I firmly believe the warm welcome extended to the opening of Japan House Los Angeles reflects trust and goodwill towards Japan cultivated by people of Japanese descent in the U.S., and I express my deepest gratitude. I look forward to the opportunities to promote Japan's attractions to the world through Japan House, in continuing cooperation with the Nikkei community.

My latest U.S. visit, to the three cities of Honolulu, San Francisco and Los Angeles, aimed to strengthen relationships with Japanese Americans.

Nikkei share roots with Japanese, and many have a deep understanding of and affinity for Japan. Thus, Japan and Nikkei have an important

connection. Even before I became Japan's minister for foreign affairs, I believed that rebuilding bonds between Japan and the Japanese American community would play a vital role in strengthening Japan-U.S. ties.

For this reason, the people of Japan need to understand the history of Japanese Americans. First-generation Japanese immigrants, or Issei, arrived in an entirely new world, building their lives amid hardship as they faced discrimination and prejudice at times. I learned about this history from a Japanese American couple who took care of me when I visited the U.S. for the first time as a junior high school student.

Mr. George Takei's musical "Allegiance" depicts the experiences of Japanese Americans, including the onset of war between Japan and the U.S., life in internment camps, and the 442nd Infantry Regiment — composed primarily of Japanese Americans. When the "Allegiance" movie held its premiere in Japan last November, I attended. But many people in Japan are not necessarily aware of the history of Japanese Americans and their struggles.

Japanese Americans overcame turbulent times and worked hard to restore their rights in the U.S., ultimately winning back trust in society. In Los Angeles and many other locations around the world, people of Japanese descent have risen to prominent positions in a wide range of fields. I am certain this has contributed significantly to improving the U.S. perception of Japan.

My sincere hope is that Japanese Americans have an opportunity to rediscover their own roots, while the people of Japan learn more about the history of Japanese Americans. By doing so, we are able to mutually enhance the bonds that connect us.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has carried out the Japanese American Leadership Delegation program since 2000, welcoming 18 visits to date. The program provides Japanese American leaders from different fields who are third-generation, or Sansei, and younger to travel to Japan. I was involved with JALD even before becoming minister for foreign affairs.

I have met with past participants of JALD at all three cities I have visited during this trip. Many JALD participants have told me that the program instilled in them a keen understanding of their Japanese roots and how they want to do their part to help strengthen Japan-U.S. ties.

From the perspective of Japanese diplomacy, we could not be more grateful. At the same time, we take it to heart that the people of Japan should do their part to make our country worthy of Nikkei support.

This year marks the 150th anniversary of Japanese immigration overseas. I hope my visit to the U.S. inspires Japanese and younger generations of Japanese Americans to expand their knowledge about the history of Japanese Americans.

My hope is that this can help serve as a foundation for forward-looking Japanese and Japanese Americans to strengthen their relationship, and further contribute to a deepening of the Japan-U.S. alliance.