

Kathy Masaoka - Bio

I was born and raised in multicultural Boyle Heights, Los Angeles, California and came of age during the late 60's. These were very important influences on my values and on the direction of my life. The Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, the struggle for ethnic studies and Asian American Studies clarified not only my identity as a Japanese American and minority in this country but also the importance of community and internationalism.

After graduation from UC Berkeley, I became involved with the Japanese American Community Services-Asian Involvement (JACS-AI) office in Little Tokyo. In 1971, 31 young people had overdosed on drugs yet the community denied that there was a drug problem in the community. We organized a group called the Asian Community Drug Offensive to educate others and our own community about the problem and to confront the overproduction of "reds" by the Eli Lilly Company. As part of JACS- AI, I helped to start a Parents Group and eventually a group called the East LA Outreach Team to work with young people in the junior high and high schools in Boyle Heights. Eventually, the youth organized a group called the Young Spirits and joined with other Asian American youth to support Agabayani Village, a retirement home for the "manongs", elderly Pilipino farmworkers in Delano. The East LA Outreach Team made efforts to organize the Japanese Americans in Boyle Heights through a food coop project – rice distribution program - and developed educational workshops on issues including redress and reparations.

As part of the Little Tokyo People's Rights Organization, I was part of the Worker Newcomers Committee which did outreach to workers in Little Tokyo with materials explaining their rights as workers. It also supported the Horikawa workers in Little Tokyo who were trying to organize a union and other workers with labor complaints. I worked at the Little Tokyo Service Center, coordinating the Nikkei Escort and Interpreter Program and continued to work with residents of the San Pedro Firm Building as part of the Housing Committee of the Little Tokyo Service Center until the LTSC Community Development Corporation was formed.

Since 1980 I have been a part of the National Coalition for Redress & Reparations (NCRR), now the Nikkei for Civil Rights & Redress which helped to lead a grassroots campaign to win redress for Japanese Americans. I was Cochair of NCRR during the late 80's, helping to lead outreach and grassroots efforts, testifying at the 1981 hearings and going to Washington DC with the 120 plus delegation in 1987, as the legislation moved from committee to the House to the Senate and finally passage. In 1989 I was able to represent NCRR in Japan as part of a delegation to support the rights of Korean and other minorities in Japan who were opposing discrimination and the fingerprinting law. In the late 90's again I was able to represent NCRR in a delegation of workers from New Otani who joined with the Hanaoka Support Committee in Japan against Kajima. Kajima had enslaved Chinese laborers during WWII in the Hanaoka mines and the survivors were seeking reparations. This also led to supporting the call for reparations and an apology for comfort women.

I have continued to work with the Education Committee which conducted teacher workshops on the film, "Stand Up for Justice" and has preserved testimonies (both projects co-produced with Visual Communications) from the CWRIC (Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment

of Civilians) or Commission Hearings tapes from 1981. After 9/11, we formed the NCRR 9/11 Committee to build a relationship of support with the Muslim and South Asian communities, starting programs such as the “Break the Fast” during Ramadan and Bridging Communities to bring JA and Muslim high students together to learn about their communities, histories and values. We have continued to build bridges, as scapegoating and unjust laws and executive orders call for the Muslim Ban and deportation of immigrants, through Vigilant Love and the Nikkei Progressives (NP) and to support youth through the Summer Activist Training. Together with NCRR and NP, I am part of a committee is committed to educating ourselves as well as our community about the basis and need for reparations for slavery and repairing the long lasting impact of that injustice.

Little Tokyo is also where we are rooted as part of the Sustainable Little Tokyo project. I serve on the Board of the Little Tokyo Service Center, volunteer at the Far East Lounge, enjoy yoga and tai chi and work on poetry with Amy Uyematsu and support the FandangObon bringing the Japanese American, Latino and African American communities together. I have performed with Great Leap projects, “Memories of Boyle Heights” and “Yellow Pearl: Remix.”

I taught for 30 years at a continuation high school in LAUSD located at All Peoples in South Central Los Angeles, am married to Mark Masaoka, with two children, Mayumi and Dan and grandsons, Yuma and Leo.