

COMMUNITY

Former Redress Chief Bob Bratt Honored

The former ORA executive director personally presents NCCR spokesperson Bert Nakano with his redress check—the billionth dollar paid out by the government since the program began.

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Robert K. Bratt, former Office of Redress Administration (ORA) executive director, declared that "redress is in my blood," as he was honored by the National Coalition for Redress and Reparations (NCCR) on Friday night at a dinner party in downtown Los Angeles.

The NCCR paid tribute to Bratt for his dedicated and conscientious efforts to ensure that all Japanese Americans eligible for redress were located, identified and compensated for having their civil rights grossly violated during World War II.

Bert Nakano, NCCR national spokesperson, congratulated Bratt on his promotion in the Department of Justice, and said that the former ORA chief is well-known and well-liked, and made it much easier for the redress recipients to receive their payments.

"He made (the redress program) very inclusive, instead of exclusive," Nakano exclaimed. "He's the first bureaucrat I didn't have to fight with."

Kay Ochi of NCCR said, "It was not a coincidence that he was appointed to be the executive officer of ORA. He lobbied for the position, and did some background work for it."

She said that Bratt, an avid golfer and a workaholic, carried to his job at ORA "an attitude, the approach with which he carried out redress. . . I think that all of us are very fortunate."

Bratt disclosed that he first heard about Japanese Americans being put in World War II concentration camps through his cousin Joann's husband, Ken Yamamoto, back in Silver Springs, Maryland, when he was nine or 10 years old.

As a result, in 1988, when the redress bill was about to be passed, he lobbied hard to get the ORA executive director's job, and was even asked to do a budget estimate for the ORA, he said.

After getting the ORA job, he first met with a lot of skepticism from the Japanese American community because redress was being handled by their old nemesis, the Justice Department, Bratt recalled.



ELIAS CARRILLO/Rafu Shimpo

Bert Nakano with an oversized cardboard check stating that he has received the billionth dollar paid out by the redress program.

By working hard, Bratt and the rest of the staff at ORA convinced the Nikkei community that they were dedicated to doing a thorough job, getting those redress checks out as soon as humanly possible to all eligible and verified recipients.

Bratt is now executive officer of the Justice Department's Criminal Division, where he inherited a "huge budget problem," which requires working long hours—about 12 hours a day—to invest to find solutions.

It was a job he did not apply for, Bratt disclosed, but which he was pressured to accept because people at the Justice Department told him they needed him.

But Bratt still works on redress when he has the time. "Redress is in my blood," he said. "I will not leave

it until it's all taken care of."

There were two outstanding reasons for the success of the redress process, Bratt said.

"Number one, without NCCR's efforts—working with us—we couldn't have been that successful. We couldn't have had the workshops, we couldn't have identified or located all those people," he said.

"Number two, ORA, now under Paul Suddes, is one of the best group of federal employees I've ever seen—they're so hard-working and dedicated. . . They're such a great group, the best that we could put together."

He told the NCCR faithful gathered at the Shangri-La Restaurant. "I appreciate being with you here tonight. This is not the end, but the continuation of our friendship. The

thing that's going to mean the most to me in the remaining years is that whenever I come to Los Angeles or you come to Washington, we'll get together and share stories."

Bratt added, "I've always felt that we made friends for life. These have been the best years of my life, working on redress."

Miya Iwataki, NCCR's co-chair, told Bratt, "You made the redress process 'user friendly' . . . We appreciate what you've done for Japanese Americans."

Following Bratt's little speech, NCCR presented him with a gift, a print of a work by famed Japanese wood-block printing artist Utamaro.

Bratt, then presented NCCR's Nakano with a surprise gift, a personally hand-delivered redress check, and an oversized cardboard check indicating that this was the \$1 billionth paid out by ORA since the redress program began.

Nakano, appearing surprised—even dumbfounded—uttered: "Maybe now I can retire."

Then, pointing to the oversized check, he laughed, "This check is going to be framed."

Bratt revealed that the original government estimate of 60,000 eligible redress recipients was short by about 15,000 people. Thus there is at present only enough money in the budget to pay people who were born up to 1934.

"We're just waiting for Congress to appropriate the money to pay the rest (of the eligibles)," he said. "I think that bill will pass. Right now we have 23,500 people verified, and 20,000 are ready to be paid. We're just looking for the extra money."

Bratt announced to the gathering of 40 people that ORA has paid out \$1 billion in redress, and he noted that 43,938 of these individuals were in camps, 2,906 were voluntary evacuees, 1,898 people were in the military, 254 were from Hawaii, 188 were INS detainees, and 129 were

Peruvians excluded from their native land and sent to camps in the United States.

He added that 1,466 (non-Japanese) spouses have been compensated, 4,051 children (of those intermarriages) have been paid, 17 parents of deceased eligible recipients have been paid, and 1,053 payments have gone overseas, to all continents of the world.

The oldest person to receive a check was 108, and there were 13 heirs receiving payments, Bratt revealed.

In addition, 89 people over 100 years old received payments, 2,050 people over 90 year of age received checks, and 35 people requested a new apology letter.

"Someone needed help so bad, that at a JAFL convention in San Diego, a guy followed me into the bathroom to ask me about ORA stuff," he recalled.

Most heartwarming story, Bratt related, was about a homeless person in San Francisco who was found by Sox Kitashima and others. They searched until they discovered two people who knew him in camp and gave proof of his identification so that he could his eligibility could be verified.

Five other Japanese Americans were also found living on the streets in San Francisco and had their eligibility verified.

"This has been the greatest experience I've had, working with everybody on redress," Bratt said.



ELIAS CARRILLO/Rafu Shimpo

Bob Bratt surprises NCCR's Bert Nakano with a special check presentation at a Los Angeles dinner last week.