Speakers Blast Immigrant-Bashing at Day of Remembrance Program

James Omura is awarded NCRR's Fighting Spirit Award.

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The National Coalition for Redress/Reparations 13th annual Day of Remembrance focused on the Japanese American community's immigrant heritage as speakers criticized immigrant-bashing in this country on Saturday at the Japan America Theatre in Los Angeles' Little Tokyo.

An estimated 550 people attended the yearly program commemorating President Franklin D. Roosevelt's issuance of Executive Order 9066, which authorized the internment of 120,000 persons of Japanese descent in U.S. concentration camps.

During the program, James Omura of Denver received NCRR's Fighting Spirit Award for his courage in defending editorially the Heart Mountain draft resisters during World War II.

Keynote speaker Glenn Omatsu, of UCLA's Asian American Studies Department, reminded the audience that the Japanese American community's very recent immigrant history is similar to that of people now being targeted by the current anti-immigrant campaign—mostly Latinos and other Asians.

"Here in Little Tokyo, our immigrant history is all around us. We're constantly reminded of the efforts of the first generation Japanese to secure a livelihood despite alien land laws, racist violence and wartime internment," he commented.

"We are also reminded of ongoing struggles, such as the decades-long campaign to win redress and reparations. That victory was not only for Japanese Americans, it was a victory for civil and human rights of all Americans," stated Omatsu.

"The Nisei generation can "provide valuable insight into the workings of racism in this country," Omatsu said. "The Nisei can also provide political insights about coalition-building and inter-ethnic alliances. And they can share their experiences about the successful campaign for redress and reparations."

Angelo Ancheta, executive director of the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights-Los Angeles (CHIRLA), who disclosed that his Pilipino father would have been classified today as an illegal alien, also criticized the immigrant-bashing and proposed to denounce undocumented immigrants aid after the earthquake. Ancheta said.

"It is corporations getting rich from immigrant labor but denying any accountability to the laborers or the community they are exploiting. Those who engage in immigrant-bashing ignore these basic fundamental facts."

Punctuating the urgency for people of color to join in solidarity to oppose racism and demand corporate and government accountability, Omatsu also emphasized the need for Asian Americans to "educate our own community about the basic facts."

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Richard Katsuda of NCRR reads a poem written by Nobuko Miyamoto.

Frank Emi, right, congratulates retired newspaperman Jimmie Omura, recipient of the Fighting Spirit Award at NCRR's Day of Remembrance on Saturday.

Glenn Omatsu speaks on immigrant-bashing.

Omura recalled that when he first "plunged into journalism, in Los Angeles in 1933, the situation was Nikkei. "To receive it here in the focal center of Japanese America makes it that much more important."

"The UCLA instructor told of the racism and violence early Asian immigrants had to endure, as exemplified by the 1871 lynching in Los Angeles of 19 Chinese and the subsequent passage of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act.
classified today as an illegal alien, also criticized the immigrant-bashing as "mean-spirited."

Ancheta drew a parallel between the internment of Japanese Americans in concentration camps 52 years ago and the immigrant-bashing of today. "Racism and hysteria led to the internment, and the parallels are recognizable in the debate on immigration," said Ancheta.

Gov. Pete Wilson's proposal to deny U.S. citizenship to American-born children of aliens "would gut the 14th Amendment, the hallmark of our Constitution, designed against slavery and oppression of people of color," he continued.

"The history of this nation has always been a history of exclusion. Our immigration laws have always been designed to keep people out, not let them in," Ancheta added.

The parallels to the past are "striking," he said. "We encourage the importation of foreign labor in times of economic boom, the way Japanese immigrants were brought to the fields of Hawaii... We give immigrants jobs no one else will perform."

However, during an economic downturn, the popular response is to claim that "immigrants are unassimilable, they take away American jobs, they use up all the resources and threaten our culture, making it hard for our problems. But immigrants are not responsible for plant closures, cutbacks in social services or the massive transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich during the past decades. These facts are the result of corporate decisions and government policies," he stressed.

"We need to redirect the debate from immigration-bashing to deal with these decisions and policies," Omatsu said.

The basic problem in American immigration had to endure, as exemplified by the 1871 lynching in Los Angeles of 19 Chinese and the subsequent passage of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act.

"In American history, Chinese and other Asian ethnic groups are the only populations that have been specifically targeted for immigration exclusion," Omatsu maintained.

The downtown financial district was at one time adjacent to Little Tokyo, Omatsu recalled, "symbolizing the complex relationship of immigrants to the corporate elite in this country."

Historically, he explained, "big business recruited immigrants as a source of cheap labor, but have never been concerned with their rights."

For corporations, the focus remains cheap labor and large profits—and not immigrants' human rights, Omatsu declared.

"In times of economic crises, immigrants are the first to be blamed for our problems. But immigrants are not responsible for plant closures, cutbacks in social services or the massive transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich during the past decades. These facts are the result of corporate decisions and government policies," he stressed.

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The Bibak Dance Ensemble perform to an enthusiastic crowd.

Actor Sab Shimono, left, plays the lead in a segment of Momoko Togoko's play, "Gold Watch." Brady Tsurutani, right, is the son in the short sketch.

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Yen-Dollar Rate

The U.S. dollar closed higher against the Japanese yen Tuesday, while prices on the Tokyo Stock Exchange were mixed in moderate trading.

The dollar ended the day at 105.95 yen, up 0.72 yen from Monday's close but below its finish in London overnight at 106.30 yen. After opening at 106.48 yen, it ranged from 105.70 yen to 106.50 yen. —Associated Press