

Remarks by Consul General Muto

Los Angeles Urban League Whitney M. Young, Jr. Annual Awards Dinner
June 30, 2022 (Thurs)

Good evening. I would like to extend my heartfelt congratulations to the Los Angeles Urban League on your centennial anniversary: to Board Chair Elliot Hinds, President Ambassador Michael Lawson, and all board members, staff, and supporters.

It is my honor to join you here tonight in celebrating your milestone 100th anniversary.

Since my arrival in Los Angeles in 2019, I've been grateful to meet many prominent leaders of the local African American community and learn about the remarkable achievements of organizations such as the Urban League. Among these leaders, Ambassador Lawson has been very generous with his time and connections. Ambassador: I am grateful for your friendship and kind invitation tonight.

During the pandemic, after the tragic death of George Floyd with the increasing growth of awareness and advocacy for the African American community, I felt it was very important for my consulate to get involved.

I would like to announce today the four pillars of collaborations for solidarity in the U.S. that my consulate will work on with the African American community.

The first pillar is the Japan & Black L.A. Initiative, which we launched in November 2020 after a series of discussions and learning sessions on my part as a collaboration with Black clergy of the United Methodist Church California Pacific Conference. This Initiative strives to enhance mutual understanding between the Japanese and Black communities, as global citizens in God's world. I feel it's vital for the Japanese community to learn more about the history of Black America to get to know what the U.S. stands for.

In collaboration with the UMC Black clergy, we've held virtual workshops to share Japanese culture such as origami (paper folds) and Japan's "soul food" onigiri (rice balls) and together we visited the California African American Museum and Japanese American National Museum.

My wife and I also visited St. John's Church in Watts upon the kind invitation of Rev. Dr. Kathey Wilborn, who explained the history of the church and Watts Towers, just steps away. Rev. Dr. Ken Walden of Holman UMC in West Adams has also been a dedicated partner of the initiative. From the Japanese American community, Superintendent of the UMC Rev. Mark Nakagawa, and Dr. Curtiss Takada Rooks of Loyola Marymount University have also worked tirelessly to support this Initiative from its early days.

In the context of the first pillar of deepening mutual understanding through the Japan and Black L.A. Initiative, the further expansion of Japanese language education has been an important element. In addition to holding a virtual Japanese language workshop for youth in partnership with the LA Urban League last fall, we've been in discussions for the possible opening of a Saturday Japanese language class in the future to allow a wider circle of children access to Japanese language, which I hope will increase their opportunities as they grow.

The second pillar focuses on business opportunities: the Japan Job Training program, or JJT.

Cal State University Dominguez Hills led by President Thomas Parham has been a gracious supporter of these efforts. This idea first arose in conversations with Ambassador Lawson, who reminded me of the well-known Toyota Technical Training Center on Crenshaw Boulevard, which was established after the civil unrest of 1992 to give local youths automotive training and new job opportunities, and which was also supported by Congresswoman Karen Bass. That training center has closed, but we are working, including with Cal State Dominguez Hills, to launch a new program with that same spirit of opportunity, connecting Japanese businesses more closely to the community through enhanced education and employment opportunities.

This JJT program has gained the interest and support of 11 Japanese companies, 6 of which – Mitsubishi Electric, Suntory, Panasonic, Manufacturers Bank, ANA and REDAC Gateway Hotel – to start with, have partnered with Cal State Dominguez Hills.

This new partnership with Cal State Dominguez Hills will pursue internships and mini-internships, on-campus company recruitment opportunities, and seek a new curriculum to better prepare students through R&D or development of new products, which we hope will lead to the creation of new jobs.

I am today happy to share that among these companies, Sony Pictures has already committed to offering two of their prestigious internships with monthly stipends to Dominguez Hills students, starting this upcoming academic year, in support of the JJT effort.

The Japanese companies will be expecting the LA Urban League to promote their business activities in the region, to help improve the business climate in the region and create a mutual benefit, and to support prosperity and improve local life.

A third pillar is about youth exchange and supporting next generation leadership. As part of the KAKEHASHI Young Leaders program sponsored by the Government of Japan, in a few weeks, LA City Councilmember Marqueece Harris-Dawson will lead a delegation of promising young African American leaders to Japan for a week-long visit to meet with Japanese officials and learn about Japan's history, culture, and modern day developments.

The delegates were all selected by Councilman Harris-Dawson and Ambassador Lawson and are: Diandra Bremond, Kristen Gordon, Francis Roberts, Nicole Walker, and Prophet Walker.

Dr. Diandra “Dee” Bremond is Consultant at DOT Education Consulting and is adjunct lecturer at the USC School of Social Work.

Kristen Gordon is Owner and Principal of KAG Group.

Francis Roberts is Head of Creator Partnerships at Snap Inc.

Nicole Walker is the Environmental Planning Manager for Ontario International Airport Authority and Advocacy Chair for the LA Urban League Young Professionals.

Prophet Walker is Co-Founder and CEO of Treehouse.

The fourth pillar is the institutionalization of all of these efforts by local institutions, and I am grateful to have a strong partnership with the local Japanese American community in this regard. In March, my consulate partnered with the Japanese American Cultural & Community Center (JACCC) led by

President & CEO Ms. Patricia Wyatt to hold Spring Jazz Night, which featured Black and Japanese musicians playing a dynamic fusion of jazz and traditional Japanese music.

Soon the JACCC will launch the Bronzeville project, which will showcase the fascinating history of Little Tokyo during World War II as a hub of the African American jazz scene and bring more awareness to the shared linkages between the two communities and their mutually supportive relationship. Especially notable was how the African American community helped preserve the properties of Japanese Americans during the internment years of World War II.

These community building efforts are especially important today as the Russian invasion in Ukraine has shown the fragility of democracy and the importance for democracies to stand united to fight against tyrannies. When we need the U.S. as a beacon of democracies, the divides within the U.S. hinders this fight, and undermines the legitimacy of democracy to allow it to be exploited by tyrannies. Therefore the Japanese community will pool resources together to support efforts within the U.S. for unity, solidarity, and deeper friendship. The four pillars I mentioned today are our humble contributions to these efforts.

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude again to the LA Urban League and my heartfelt congratulations for 100 years. May we continue to find many avenues for deeper kinship and mutual understanding.

I wish you continued great success!

Thank you.