

2020 Public Symposium: Closing Session Recap

November 19, 7:45 – 8:30 pm ET: Closing Session featuring Emerging Leaders Program alumni panel

Speakers:

- Special Remarks: Colbert Matsumoto, Chairman, Island Insurance Company, Ltd.
- Danielle Higa, Fund Development Manager, Densho
- Steve Sakanashi, Director of Marketing & Global Strategy, Matchbox Technologies
- Kira Teshima, Associate, Sheppard Mullin Richter & Hampton LLP
- Closing Remarks: Suzanne Basalla, President & CEO, U.S.-Japan Council

Description: Closing out the USJC Public Symposium, we look to our young leaders for a message of hope and call-to-action around building strong and resilient communities. Three accomplished alumni of the USJC Emerging Leaders Program will share their inspiring stories of family legacies, personal growth, and investing in the next generation of leaders.

Summary: On November 19, the U.S.-Japan Council closed out the 2020 Public Symposium with a 45-minute session looking ahead to the continued development of U.S.-Japan relations through interpersonal connections on an individual, societal, and international basis. Following special remarks from Colbert Matsumoto (Chairman, Island Insurance Company, Ltd.), alumni members Danielle Higa (Fund Development Manager, Densho), Steve Sakanashi (Director of Marketing & Global Strategy, Matchbox Technologies), and Kira Teshima (Associate, Sheppard Mullin Richter & Hampton LLP) of the USJC Emerging Leaders Program shared their stories about personal growth, their Japanese American identity, and the importance of organizations like USJC in forging the next generation of Japanese American leaders. Lastly, Suzanne Basalla (President & CEO, U.S.-Japan Council) concluded the Public Symposium by thanking the generous supporters, moderators, panelists, and staff that helped make the 2020 Public Symposium possible.

A key theme throughout the Public Symposium was the importance of a close-knit community in facilitating cooperation and comradery. Kira Teshima detailed how her first involvement with community was through getting to know 2011 ELP Participant Dana Heatherton and her work at the Japanese American National Museum, an experience that helped instill a passion in Ms. Teshima to continue community building. Ms. Teshima currently serves on the Board of Directors of the Little Tokyo Service Center and is the President-Elect of the Japanese American Bar Association (JABA). Through her nonprofit work to improve the lives of underserved families in the Los Angeles community, Ms. Teshima described renewed feelings of empowerment and hope, even during these difficult times.

Danielle Higa, a Yonsei Japanese American from Seattle, also spoke to the power of community through her close ties with her family members. From a young age, Ms. Higa was heavily involved in the Nisei Veterans Community and learned about the horrors of the Japanese American internment camps firsthand through talks by the NVC and through chats with her grandparents. These experiences inspired her to give back to her local community and stay connected to her Japanese American identity. Ms. Higa currently serves as the Fund Development Manager at Densho, a Seattle-based community history organization that aims to increase awareness of Japanese Americans who were incarcerated during World War II. In addition, Ms. Higa is the First Vice President of the Nisei Veterans Committee. Ms. Higa sees her work now as an opportune way to not only stay connected to the past but to also uplift and empower young leaders for the future.

Lastly, Steve Sakanashi spoke about his journey to rediscover his Japanese roots. Mr. Sakanashi moved to Japan in 2014 after growing up in Los Angeles to better understand and connect with his Japanese heritage. After his father's passing when he was 18 years old, Mr. Sakanashi always harbored hopes of getting to know and support his father's homeland, and in 2012 he started Sekai Creator, a start-up incubator for Japanese university students. In 2016, Mr. Sakanashi was invited to join the USJC TOMODACHI Initiative's annual Silicon Valley Trip to serve as a leader and mentor for Japanese entrepreneurs, and the following year, Mr. Sakanashi joined the APT Women Startup Accelerator to help female entrepreneurs in Tokyo reach a wider audience. Mr. Sakanashi, who has a son and daughter, also describes his hopes for a more inclusive and accommodating Japanese society unfettered by social constructs and traditional expectations. "In truth, that future feels farther away than I would like to admit," Mr. Sakanashi said. "But when I think about my Japanese peers, my TOMODACHI alumni, and my own children and their friends, I'm confident that we can create, and will create, a better Japan."