

Leaders meet to strengthen Japan-American ties

BY JULIAN RYALL
Japan Correspondent

TOKYO — Ten key members of the Japanese-American community have met senior government officials in Tokyo, including Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, during a nine-day trip designed to reinforce personal, political and business ties across the Pacific Ocean.

The Japanese-American Leadership Delegation program is organized annually by the Washington, D.C.-based U.S.-Japan Council and this year included a visit to Yamaguchi Prefecture, in southern Japan, for a symposium examining the Japanese-American experience in a year that marks the 150th anniversary of the first emigration from Japan to Hawaii.

Yamaguchi was selected for the visit in part because it is the home prefecture of the prime minister, as well as being the source of a large number of emigrants from Japan over the last 150 years, including relatives of three of the members of this year's delegation.

"This year marks the 150th anniversary of the Meiji Restoration and the first organized groups of emigrants from places like Yamaguchi, and we are seeing an increase in people in the Japanese-American community in the U.S. looking to rediscover their roots here," said Irene Hirano Inouye, president of the council.

"Every year, we come with a number of messages, but this year the delegation really reflects the changing chemistry of the Nikkei community in the U.S.," she told the Journal.

"When we started this program in 2000, it was designed to

allow third and fourth-generation Japanese-Americans — many of whom had only previously had a limited connection to Japan or never even had the opportunity to visit — that chance," she said.

And whilst in the past, many of the delegates had identifiable family ties to Japan, only two members of this group had familial connections that could be traced back to before World War II.

"Several of our number have mixed heritage and that increasingly reflects the demographics of our community," Inouye said, pointing out that in the most recent census, there were 1.3 million Japanese-Americans who identi-

fy themselves as being of mixed heritage.

"The Japanese-American community continues to evolve and change, but the importance of being able to connect with Japan regardless of the degree of ethnicity is very strong," she added.

As well as meeting the prime minister, the delegates met with Her Imperial Highness Princess Takamodo, Former Speaker of the House of Representatives Yohei Kono and had dinner with Taro Kono, the serving foreign minister.

They also paid a courtesy call on U.S. Ambassador William F. Hagerty, enjoyed a lunch hosted by the Keidanren business lobby

and met with representatives of the Japan-U.S. Parliamentary Friendship League. They were also able to take in some of Tokyo's sights, including the Harajuku and Omotesando shopping districts and the Meiji Jingu shrine.

The 10 delegates were drawn from eight states across the United States and included Monica Okada Guzman, CEO and managing director of the Guam-based Galaide Group LLC and vice chairwoman of the Guam Nikkei Association.

"Since we have been here, we have been able to have some very useful conversations on a wide

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Endo-Omoto



Inouye



Guzman

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Monica Okada Guzman, CEO and managing director of Galaide Group LLC (right) met with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in Yamaguchi.

Photo courtesy of Monica Okada Guzman

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range of issues that are of shared concern," she said. "Being here is so important because it gives us real insight into Japan at a critical juncture for the country as it looks to its longer-term future.

"This society faces many problems today that we will have to deal with in the future, from a declining population to a rapidly ageing population, questions over how to integrate the Japanese economy and so on," she said. "Japan's experience will have many important lessons for us and we can learn a great deal from each other."

One issue that Japanese women were particularly keen to discuss was female participation in the workplace, Guzman said,

given Prime Minister Abe's proposals for raising the number of working women — known as "womenomics," in a play on his broader "Abenomics" economic policies.

"The change appears to be slow, but it is there and more women are coming into the workforce, but there still seems to be less of a sense of shared responsibility for raising children and keeping the home," she said. "And that is very interesting to me, coming from a Chamorro society which is very women-oriented."

Guzman also underlined the importance of the JALD, particularly given that Guam is relatively geographically isolated from the mainland United States and the program brings together people from shared backgrounds and provides a range of different perspectives and opinions.

Speaking ahead of the panel discussion in Yamaguchi Prefecture, Darcy Endo-Omoto said she also welcomed the opportunity to exchange experiences and attitudes among people who can trace their roots back to Japan.

"My grandparents came from Yamaguchi and Hiroshima prefectures, but they met in Hawaii, which is a real melting pot of so many cultures," said Endo-Omoto, who serves as vice president for Government and Community Affairs for Hawaiian Electric.

The experiences of emigrants to the United States have not always been easy, she said, pointing to the incarceration of Japanese-American residents during World War II, but she adds that many rose above that situation to serve with distinction in the U.S. military in the European theater of operations.


"They had a strong motivation to succeed even when things were difficult for them and that continues to this day in a sense of positivity and the commitment to society," she said.

Endo-Omoto had never previously visited Yamaguchi Prefecture but said that she would be returning again in a few weeks with a number of her family for a holiday and to "reconnect" with the region that her grandparents hailed from.

"The whole event has already been a success and members of the group have now got to know each other, and those relationships will have long-term benefits for all of us," Inouye said.

Preparations for next year's JALD visit are already under way, with the southern prefecture of Kagoshima under consideration as the trip outside Tokyo to see progress in efforts to rebuild areas that sustained serious damage in a series of earthquakes and aftershocks that struck the region in April 2016. **mbj**


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