

Japanese in TEXAS?

By STEVEN K. SANO

Japanese-Texans? Who would have ever thought there was any significant Japanese American activity away from either of the coasts? Who would have ever thought there would be a Japanese American Citizens League chapter in Houston, Japanese supplemental schools in Austin, Dallas, Houston, Laredo, and San Antonio, and Japan-America Societies in Austin, Dallas, Houston and San Antonio?

And who would have ever thought there were two Japanese American and Japanese Latin American internment camps in Kenedy and Crystal City, Texas?

Japanese-Texans will soon celebrate over 100 years of Texas settlement during this next year, and we are proud to report an increase in Japanese American activity here in San Antonio, Texas. The first Japanese-Texans came to the Houston area in the late 1800s and early 1900s to develop the rice industry. I arrived only in the mid-1980s.

It has been two years since I have become actively involved in developing the Japan-America Society of San Antonio. Finally, I feel that JASSA is transforming itself into a credible cultural and educational community organization. JASSA is rapidly becoming a strong cultural organization and assisting in the development of many educational initiatives given the number of institutions interested in Asian and Japanese programming.

Within the city of San Antonio, we are outreaching into the African American community, where we are providing Japanese curricula to the David Robinson's Carver Academy and have made alliances with the Alamo City Chamber of Commerce and the African American Leadership Institute. Additionally, we are assisting Our Lady of the Lake University's Office of the Vice President for Institutional Advancement, the University of the Incarnate Word, the Instituto Cultural Mexicano, and directly to the San Antonio Mayor's Office, to diversify their vision, and to garner public and corporate sup-

port for this organization.

In cooperation with the Jewish Community we are planning to co-sponsoring initiatives exploring our common ground during the Holocaust, in particular the many contributions of Japanese diplomats and citizens saving Jewish lives. Further, we are involved in the telling the history and development of facilities for remembering the Japanese American and Japanese Latin American Department of Justice Internment Camps in Kenedy and Crystal City, Texas. Finally, are supporting the efforts of the San Antonio Museum of Art in their construction of their Asian Art Wing, which will house a premier collection of Asian Art.

Given the current state of affairs with Mexico, I feel we are in a unique position to allow San Antonio and South Texas an alternative to the Latin American markets and culture, and look east rather than south for a source of inspiration and economic development.

I believe our vision for San Antonio is to assist in the development of an educational and cultural infrastructure to help foster and develop economic growth for this region.

Our vision is to further grow our community to appreciate and maintain the Japanese and Asian heritage that helped develop San Antonio and south Texas. In developing these initiatives we must also include dialogue to develop a Japanese (or Asian) Educational and Cultural Center, which can further unify our community and address domestic problems and programs.

According to 2000 Census data there are more than 1,700 persons in San Antonio that claim full Japanese ancestry, but the number grows to approximately 3,200 with the inclusion of those persons who claim to be part Japanese. The population further swells, according to the Houston Consul General of Japan, with the addition of the 400 or so Japanese nationals, students and green-card holders close to 4,000 persons claiming Japanese ethnicity in San Antonio.

Although these numbers seem

relatively small to those outside the coasts, we have (as a community) contributed to developing the economic infrastructure of the city. Now we must move towards political empowerment to further developing our community. And in this city, the out-

come of many elections may be determined by a few thousand votes. I do believe we have a critical mass.

Part of our goal, and our mission, can be divided into four sections: first we must identify our Nikkei population through information and outreach into the different communities throughout central and south Texas; second is to maintain our identity through self-awareness, newcomer services, and youth programs; third is to preserve our traditions through educational and cultural initiatives; and fourth is to assist our Issei and Nisei seniors of Central and South Texas through housing, health care, "bento box" on wheels and economic relief programs.

But we must always be mindful that the mission statement for the Japan America Society is to foster better relationships between Japan and the United States through cultural, educational and business programs.

There is a reality that we must be able to have a meeting place, organizational offices, and a program site to develop, foster, and execute our initiatives and vision. The development of a Japanese community center will be a difficult struggle, and it may be economically disheartening, but it will be a triumph of the Japanese American community and the city of San Antonio to build a home that it can call its own. The Center will be a symbol

of how the community can come together to build a permanent legacy for generations to come. Our journey will be about people in the community, the businesses, the organizations, and the many individuals and families of this community who give of their talents and time to make this Center into a reality.

This summer I met with Japanese community leaders

from many cities, both domestic and abroad, about how they developed their J a p a n t o w n s , their community centers, and the elderly food and shelter programs. I now realize, even more, that a Japanese community center is an attainable

goal and I further recognize that current San Antonio community programs are not sensitive and do not respond effectively to the needs of our Asian community.

I understand we have generational, cultural (native vs. foreign born) and language difficulties within our community. I believe we need to inventory our community resources and begin to realize our strengths and identify our weaknesses. We must look at ways to fund our initiatives and partner with those organizations that see a benefit to these programs.

Doing anything worthwhile is always a struggle, but we have a vision and we have attainable goals. I have a legacy of being from a dynamic Japanese-Californian family which has endured for 100 years, and now have inherited a history of over 100 years of being Japanese-Texan. Nikkei will survive for another 100 years.

Dr. Steven K. Sano is the chief executive officer of Mercaturam, Inc./SYMBOL and the president of the Japan-America Society of San Antonio. He is the 2003-2005 Mayor's appointee to the San Antonio Library Board of Trustees, and will serve on the 2003 San Antonio Express-News Citizens Advisory Board.

