

# 日米 **Nichi Bei** WEEKLY

Keeping the Community Connected, Informed and Empowered

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## CITY PROPOSAL TO BUY AND CONVERT S.F. J-TOWN'S BUCHANAN HOTEL DRAWS FIRE PG. 3



Sept. 2, 2021

POSTMASTER: Please Do Not Delay

PERSPECTIVES PG.2



'WE LOVE YOU, JANI!'

COMMUNITY PG.7



'HIDDEN HISTORIES'

SPOTLIGHT PG.8



KOTOME LAUNCHES

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HIROSHIMA STYLE

SPORTS PG.15



PARALYMPICS ON AIR

# Perspectives

## Tribute to Jan Mirikitani

By BRENDA WONG AOKI

Jan died on my birthday. She called me while I was still in the hospital. "How ya doing?" I poured my heart out. (I'd been there nearly a month!)

For over an hour she listened, comforted. You know how she is. Then she said, "Bren, I have some bad news ... I know how much you care about me, but I may not be around for you much longer. I have cancer and its metastasized."

She had called to say goodbye! And I wasted that precious moment with my petty woes.

We hung up the way we always do. "I love you, Jan."

"I love you more." And those were the last words she ever said to me.

I will miss her — Every birthday.

I will miss her — Every *Oshogatsu*, when she'd make pots of the best *ozoni* in San Francisco, with fresh *mochi* she'd only buy from Bobby and his wife at Benkyodo.

And I promise to blast Chaka Kahn's "I'm Every Woman" whenever I get wimpy without you!

Do you hear me, Jan?

Jan died during *Obon*, the Festival of the Dead. When the Ancestors come to visit and boy, do we need their encouragement now. *Obon* is also the time the U.S. dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and in one hot flash, made us 200,000 new ancestors.

That says it all. Hitler was in Germany, but they weren't nuked. How did Asians somehow become the forever enemy of the West? ... Japan, Korea, Vietnam, China ... now Asian Hate.

I wonder what Jan is telling us, dying during *Obon*?

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I've done many performances for Jan and Cecil. My husband Mark and our boy KK, too. Once, about 24 years ago, when our son, KK, was 3, Mark and I were doing a Glide event to honor Dianne Feinstein. We were on stage at a fancy hotel downtown performing for hundreds of people. I'd left KK with my girlfriend. I looked out from the stage to see how my baby was doing and my girlfriend pantomimes that she doesn't know where he is.

Do not ever do that to a mom, when you've lost their child in a room full of strangers!

Just then, the double doors burst open and striding down the red carpet, each holding one of KK's chubby little hands, is Jan and Senator Feinstein.

After we perform, I go to Jan and Cecil's table to fetch KK. He's sitting there greasin' down with chicken all over his face.

"Mama, I wanted to be with Aunti Jan cuz she lets me eat as much fried chicken as I want!"



Janice Mirikitani passed away on July 29.

photo by Alain McLaughlin

(He loves Glide's fried chicken).

"Dis is Aunti Jan's friend." (Solemnly, using his best manner, he introduces us).

"Mama, dis is Aunti Fine!"

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I've known Jan for 50 years. In college, I choreographed to her poems. But I met her in person in the early '70s, here, where it all began — in the city of Saint Francis, San Francisco! Where Black, Brown, Yellow and Red folks began teaching OUR OWN STORY and felt the strength that comes from KNOWING IT. We called each other "Brother" and "Sister." I loved that. We were a "we," an "us." All of US.

I first heard Jan at a poetry reading at the International Hotel.

She was late. We were waiting. Four gangsta-looking bodyguards rushed in; did a quick security check. (Back then, Jan and Cecil needed bodyguards cuz they were giving sanctuary to the Panthers and to the gay guys getting beat up for coming out. They've always given sanctuary to the hunted. Plus, coming to the IHotel was dangerous. The authorities wanted us artists, activists and the Filipino elders we were protecting — GONE!)

Suddenly, a magnificent brother in a long trench with a big 'fro struts into the room, followed by this gorgeous sister wearing shades. Swag! Swag! Swag! Jan and Cecil!

Jan gets up on stage, takes off her shades and blows! I mean, she kicked it out of the ballpark! I have never heard words like that come out of the mouth of a Japanese woman!

Fierce. Brave. Sexy.

We wannabe radicals, in our gender neutral army fatigues, or if you were from J-Town, navy blue hooded sweatshirts, were thunderstruck! But before we could respond, Jan and Cecil's bodyguards whisked them away and the Light went outta the room.

### Hotel Nikko

Sometimes, Jan would take me to lunch at the Hotel Nikko. So fun! Getting all dressed up, goin' to a swanky restaurant! Jan knew

the *maitre d*. After sitting us in her special spot by the window, he'd ask, "The Usual?" (She liked steak so bloody, I could barely look at it). We had so much to talk about, we'd talk as fast as we could cuz she'd always have meetings she needed to go to. We'd laugh so hard — we could barely eat. Jan's laugh is so raucous, so perfectly connected to the belly of the Universe — it was like *satori*! I loved every moment.

What I didn't like was walking from Jan's office at Glide to the Nikko.

Cuz Jan would stop all the drug addicts, the sick, people lying in their own filth on the sidewalk. They'd hold her hand! Hug her! With mouths full of rotten teeth, they whispered in her ear. She knew their names — their story. Jan never flinched, never looked away. She was completely there for them — in her silks and stiletto heels.

Whether it was the Queen of England or a junkie on Ellis Street, Jan wanted to look her best. It was her way of showing respect.

Suddenly, a wave of shame rolled over me. I forgot, but Jan remembered. She remembered when we were the homeless.

She remembered those awful years after the war when we Japanese were scattered to the winds. She remembered feeling abandoned when the prison camps closed and she, her mom and little brother were left alone. She remembered what it felt like to be hungry, destitute, scorned and scared. She remembered when it was illegal for us Japanese, to congregate. She remembered when no one would give us work, or a place to live. Jan remembered when we were them!

### Buddha and Kuan-yin

One of my favorite performances for Glide was a work me, Mark and KK (who had become a dancer), created for Jan's birthday in 2015. Buddha and Kuan-yin in the Tenderloin. Cuz I truly believe Jan and Cecil are miracle beings. They chose to stay with us here on earth to teach us one simple thing:

"Love heals — hate kills, so focus on the love."

Jan hasn't left us ... She's right here inside our hearts.

We Love you, Jan!

*Brenda Wong Aoki is America's first nationally recognized Asian American storyteller. She is married to Mark Izu, a seminal leader in the Asian American Jazz movement. They live and work in San Francisco where her grandfather, Ren Chojiro Aoki, was a founder of Japantown in the 1800s and her grandmother, Alice Wong, a leader of the first Chinatown Garment Union. For more information visit: [www.aokizu.com](http://www.aokizu.com). The views expressed in the preceding column are not necessarily those of the Nichi Bei Weekly.*

## Letters

### Wakasa monument statement from the Friends of Topaz

August 30, 2021

To the Japanese American Community,

We are the Friends of Topaz, a group of predominately Japanese American descendants of World War II Topaz concentration camp incarcerated, living in the San Francisco Bay Area. We exist to support the Topaz Museum because we believe in their mission to preserve Topaz stories and to educate the greater public about this tragic chapter of American history, including the devastating impact the concentration camps had on its Japanese American survivors. We continually draw inspiration from the courage and resilience of our community, generations later.

In understanding the current controversy surrounding the Museum's decision to unearth the monument memorializing the unjustified killing of James Wakasa by a Topaz guard, here is the background. In June-July, *Discover Nikkei* published a five-part article on this tragic and largely unknown story.

While the article is highly informative and well-intentioned, unfortunately, the July 4, 2021 installment revealed the exact location of the half-buried monument whose location had been previously unknown to the public. This alarmed the Museum because of recent vandalism, including signage blasted apart by high-powered rifle bullets and shotgun shells, and spray painted political or racist graffiti. Because the article revealed how to find the stone, the Museum was placed in a dilemma: either ignore that the stone's location was now public and hope that nothing bad would happen, or risk that the monument, imbued with historic and spiritual meaning, would be an attractive target for wrongdoers to deface. Faced with this predicament, it decided it had to act immediately to remove the stone to the

protection of the Museum. In its haste however, it failed to notify the community in advance of the removal, thereby triggering anger and leading some to conclude that it acted with callous indifference. The Museum has since profusely apologized for failing to inform the community in advance of the unearthing, but stands by its decision that it did what was required to protect this precious monument for all posterity.

We trust the work of the Museum Board and feel that it has done nothing that disrespected the Wakasa monument. In fact, the Board has made every effort to prevent any damage to the artifact or to the Topaz site. Additionally, the decision to excavate the monument was made by the entire Topaz Museum board, including its Japanese American members.

We have worked closely with the Museum for many years and have always been informed of the actions of the Board. We are encouraged to share our opinions; and in our experience, the Museum has always been receptive to any input or suggestions from the Japanese American community. The Friends of Topaz works very closely with Topaz Board president, Jane Beckwith, on outreach and fundraising to support the Museum and its successful work over the past 25 years. The Board has now purchased the 640 acres of the camp's original site, built the Topaz Museum in the town of Delta, hosted tours of hundreds of Utah school children, and worked with the public to educate and share our descendants' stories, in order to prevent a recurrence of a similar denial of American civil rights in the future.

The climate of vicious anti-Asian hate, where physical assaults and vandalism are real,

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### JA 'offended' by 'desecration' of James Wakasa's 'final resting place'

*Editor's Note: The following letter was sent in response to the column entitled "The desecration of sacred ground" at Topaz" that appeared in the Aug. 19, 2021 issue of the Nichi Bei Weekly.*

Dear Editor:

I have just learned they discovered the secretly buried James H. Wakasa memorial monument. Mr. Wakasa was a neighbor of our family in Block 36, Topaz concentra-

tion camp in Utah. Our address was Block 36, Barrack 6, Units C and D, his was Barrack 7, Unit D. We ate with him in our mess hall and used the common lavatory and the common facilities. I was there when he was murdered by (a) U.S. Army guard, April 11th, 1943. The actual spot of his death was kept unknown from us all these almost

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