

Lori Matsukawa Speaking Tour in Brazil

“Telling Our Story: Coalition Building and the Asian American Journalists Association”

August 19-27, 2010

SEATTLE – The purpose of my trip to Brazil was to talk about the Japanese American experience and how Asian American journalists helped Japanese Americans tell their story to the rest of the nation. I was delighted to discover that Brazil also has its storytellers. The people I met through the consulates or on university campuses each shared a bit of their life story with me. The education went both ways.



Sao Paulo, largest city in South America (18 million)

I also discovered that Brazil, like the U.S., is a nation of immigrants. It’s difficult to describe what a Brazilian looks like because there are so many cultural groups here. There are the Portuguese, Italians, Germans, and an estimated 1.5 million Nikkei Brazilians, the largest Japanese population outside of Japan. (The Nikkei population in the U.S. is about half that.) There are more Lebanese in Brazil than in Lebanon. There are descendants of African slaves and several Indigenous groups.



Goki Yamashita, Yoko and Takeshi Kugihara at the Immigration Museum.

In Sao Paulo, I visited the Japanese Immigration Museum. Our gracious guide, Yoko Kugihara, spoke Portuguese and Japanese. Goki Yamashita from The Japan Foundation, Sao Paulo spoke Portuguese and Japanese and a smattering of English. Through their efforts, I was able to appreciate the history of Nikkei in Brazil. I learned that during World War II, there was no wholesale incarceration of Japanese or Germans. However, these communities were told to stay in their general neighborhoods and were not allowed to publish newspapers or worship in their native language.



Many faces of Brazil at the Okinawa Festival

I also attended the “Okinawa Festival” in the nearby town of Villa Carrao and was pleasantly surprised to see performers dancing to “Tanko Bushi” using the same hand motions as we do in Seattle! At the University of Sao Paulo, most of those attending the lecture were not familiar with the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II and expressed respect for the effort it took to reclaim their “normal” lives post-war.



Ver-o-peso market in Belem at the mouth of the Guama River.

In Belem, I was welcomed by Adjutant Consul Akira Kusunoki, his wife Satoko and their daughters Mai and Yui. I was pleasantly surprised to learn Satoko had been an exchange student living with the Jim Mason family in Federal Way, Washington. Mr. Mason was an executive at Weyerhaeuser, which does extensive trade in wood products with Japan. Satoko attended Federal Way High School and Mrs. Mason came to Japan to attend Satoko’s wedding! Because of her experience in Washington, Mrs. Kusunoki wants her daughters to learn English, so they attend the American school in Belem. I admire the Kusunokis for their sense of adventure and willingness to raise their daughters in foreign posts.



Akira and Satoko Kusunoki send their daughters to the American School so they can learn English.

While in Belem, I also met members of the Associacao Pam-Amazonia Nipo-Brasileira. The president is Dr. Yuji Ikuta, a plastic surgeon who said the most popular procedures in “body conscious” Brazil were 1) liposuction, 2) facelifts and 3) breast augmentation. In a wide-ranging discussion, the group expressed interest in how different Asian groups in Seattle work together to achieve common goals (electing Asian candidates, lobbying for services and education for Asian seniors and youth, etc.) I encouraged them to get active in politics so that Nikkei Brazilian concerns are heard and addressed. One attendee, Hideki Hiura, is running for Mayor of a nearby town. He said politicians have a poor reputation in Brazil (corrupt). There is a saying in Brazil that “Politicians have to be able to move their hips.” I think they mean politicians have to “dance” through controversy and competing constituent demands. The people of Amazonia respect the indigenous people. The Indigenous museum in Belem features beautiful photos and crafts of several tribes. While I was there, Brazil’s president signed a contract to build a controversial dam which would displace an indigenous tribe. He can do this politically because his mandatory term is ending and he is very popular among the electorate.



At the Indigenous People's Museum in Belem there were traditional handicrafts including this feather collar from the WaiWai tribe.



The Associação Cultural e Fomento Agrícola de Tome Acu has a performance hall, museum, offices, classrooms and Japanese library.

My trip to Tome Acu was a highlight. The town reminded me of the plantation town on Kauai where my grandmother lived during the '60s. The agricultural cooperative there -- the Associacao Cultural e Fomento Agricola de Tome Acu -- is 80 years old. Alberto Ke-iti Oppata is the organization's first sansei president. He's a farmer who irrigates with well water (still free for now) to extend his growing season. Therefore he continues to harvest acai while others are all picked out. Another surprise -- as a young man, Oppata san attended the University of Washington's Japan Business School for four months. He jokes that he thought he was going to attend school in Washington D.C. but ended up in Seattle instead. He is an earnest leader, determined to expand the region's agri-business. The most important message, he says, is to tell the world we farmers are growing crops at the same time we are re-growing the Amazon forests. "Agri-forestry" or SAF (sistema agroforestal) is a technique which avoids monoculture and instead, mixes a variety of crops under canopy trees. This allows a continual harvest, as different crops mature. Also, nitrogen-fixing crops are planted to restore the soil. The canopy filters the sun and slows weed growth reducing the need for herbicide. The canopy also attracts birds, which eat insects, reducing the need for insecticide. Many agricultural delegations from around the world come to Tome Acu to learn SAF. The cooperative also runs a fruit pulp processing plant. It is organically certified and pasteurizes its products. Much of the funding for the plant came from JICA. It can process 3,000 metric tons of frozen pulp a year.



**Alberto Oppata is President of CAMTA,
the Cooperativa Agricola Mista de Tome-Acu.
Here he shows a cacao fruit.**



Francisco Sakaguchi takes interpreter John Moon and me through the fruit pulp plant.

The history of the Nikkei in Tome Acu is a tribute to the industriousness of the Japanese pioneers who came to the region in the 1920s. The Issei built a hospital. The Nisei built schools and the electrical system. The Sansei built a golf course, baseball and soccer fields and the manufacturing plant. Francisco Sakaguchi and his family still live in the house his father built 50 years ago. Sakaguchi san's 76 year old mother still rakes pepper corns out to dry and performs other farm duties. Sakaguchi san says he worked seven years in Aichi, Japan as a "dekasegui" (worker who leaves his birthplace). He went there to work in manufacturing but ended up being an unofficial "mayor" to the 700 "dekasegui" living in his neighborhood. He met his wife, a Nikkei from Sao Paulo, while living there. (A 2009 survey by Leila Bijos on behalf of the Japan Foundation found there were approximately 320,000 Brazilian "dekasegui" in Japan.) Sakaguchi san and Oppata san say they don't mind their young people studying and working abroad, but want them to come back with "money and a plan" on how to improve Tome Acu and the agribusiness.



Francisco Sakaguchi and his family still live in the house his father built over 50 years ago when he came to work in the rubber plantation. Sakaguchi san's mother is 76 years old and still helps with the black pepper harvest. (They refer to pepper as "black diamonds.")



Brasilia's Congress Building designed by Oscar Niemeyer.

Our final stop in the nation's capital, Brasilia, was inspiring. The city is young – just 50 years old – bold and daring in concept thanks to the talents of urban planner, Lucio Costa, architect Oscar Niemeyer and landscape designer Roberto Burle Marx. Here, too, Nikkei Brazilians have made their mark. Many are successful business owners, transplants from Parana or Sao Paulo states (where the bulk of Brazil's Nikkei live.) As a presenter at the 8th International Congress of Japanese Studies in Brazil / 21st Brazilian Meeting of University Professors of Japanese

Language, Literature and Culture ... I once again found most attendees did not know about the Japanese American incarceration during World War II. I was gratified to find out the scholars in the audience from the U.S. and Canada were familiar with the story, having learned it through news media and colleagues. One of them, the keynote speaker Carol Gluck from Columbia University, recognized one of the anchormen in my presentation as her former student.



Presentation at University of Brasilia during the 8th International Congress of Japanese Studies in Brazil / 21st Brazilian Meeting of University Professors of Japanese Language, Literature and Culture.

In Brasilia there was yet another amazing coincidence. I met a fellow panelist, a Brazilian television journalist named Jose Floriano Filho. He was a Fulbright Scholar in the Congressional Fellowship Program two years ago doing research in the office of a Congressman from Washington state (Brian Baird)! It also turns out I had met the Embassy's Minister, Toshio Kunikata, when he was the Consul General in Hawaii four years ago during a Japanese American Leadership Delegation (JALD) reunion. He remembered Susan Yamada Scott and Mel Horikami, who had traveled to Japan with me in 2005 for JALD. It was also a great honor to attend a reception held by Ambassador Ken Shimanouchi, honoring Professor Alice Tamie Joko for her achievement in Japanese Studies at the University of Brasilia.



Dr. Yuki Mukai, Un. Of Brasilia, 1st Secretary Hitomi Sekiguchi and journalist Floriano Filho who worked in the office of Congressman Brian Baird (D) WA.



Ambassador Ken Shimanouchi at the Embassy of Japan.

Between workshops, I visited the Japanese language school in Brasilia and enjoyed learning about the lives and interests of the Vice Principal Masae Yada, the Director Kimiko Sambuichi and an adult sumi-e student named Michi Ikemoto who had actually visited Seattle and our Japanese Cultural and Community Center with her daughter! Sambuichi san said she was a “pen pal bride” – having not met her husband before agreeing to come to Brazil to marry him! Their first house didn’t have running water or electricity. When I asked her why she came, she said “to try a new adventure.”

In conclusion, I shared the Japanese American story with the Nikkei in Brazil in hopes they would appreciate what their brothers and sisters in the U.S. had achieved despite a history marked with racial discrimination and legal obstacles. There was mutual respect for the achievements of the pioneers who left Japan to seek fortune and adventure in both countries. There is mutual concern over how to keep the heritage and language alive as each generation matures. We agreed Japanese language instruction and continued cultural exchange between Japan and our respective countries were the best ways to keep the global Nikkei community connected and vibrant.



Young student at the Nihogo Gakko in Brasilia.

Respectfully submitted,

Lori Matsukawa

September 5, 2010

Seattle, Washington USA

Postscript: The week after my return from Brazil, Mr. Tomoyuki Yoshida, Director of the First North America Division, Ministry of Foreign Affairs visited the Japanese Cultural and Community Center of Washington in Seattle. (September 2, 2010) I showed him a brief slideshow of my visit to Brazil, only to learn that he spoke Portuguese and had been stationed in Brasilia during his career! He also is a close friend of Mr. Hironori Sawada, who is leaving his Embassy post in Brasilia for a new assignment in Chicago.

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