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Just Being There Represents "Nikkei": Wade Nomura of Carpinteria, CA

By Makiko Nakasone / 6 Sep 2019

While there are many Nikkei who belong to Nikkei organizations in Little Tokyo to promote the rights and status of Nikkei, there are many others who are rooted in the "American" community and represent "Nikkei" by just being there. In fact, the latter is probably the overwhelming majority. Wade Nomura (65) of Carpinteria is one of them, a powerful one.

Nomura is the new Mayor of Carpinteria, which sits just south of Santa Barbara, about 90 miles north of Los Angeles. He is the first Nikkei Mayor of Carpinteria in 35 years. Nomura has been the president of the Santa Barbara Chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League for three decades. In the past 15 years or so, he has also been active in the non-Japanese American organizations.

After graduating from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo with a degree in Ornamental Horticulture, Nomura pursued his career in landscaping, carrying on the business his grandfather and father had set up. He is currently the president of Nomura/Yamasaki Landscape, Inc. Whether running for the City Council or chartering a new Rotary Club, he could not have achieved this kind of success without the encouragement and support by his late wife, Roxanne, who passed away two years ago.



Wade Nomura at the Mayor's Desk.

When Nomura became the Mayor of Carpinteria in December 2018, the first thing he did was to have all city documents printed in both English and Spanish. Having been bullied constantly as a child in Santa Barbara only because of the way he looked, he is sensitive to minorities' issues and rights. "Fifty percent of our city's population is Hispanic. They are no longer a minority, but their voices are not heard," he explains. Most of his company employees are Hispanic and Nomura speaks fluent Spanish, much better than Japanese.

His mayoral skills were tested at the City Council meeting at the end of June, when more than 300 citizens crowded the small City Council's room. About seventy farmers and concerned residents used up the allotted three minutes each to verbalize their concerns on the illegal marijuana being grown on the city's farm lands. During the four-hour long public hearing, there were many contentious moments, where it looked like the criticisms were directed at the Mayor.

"The great thing about Wade is that he keeps his calm no matter what," compliments Gary Dobbins, a local publisher of Coastal View News. During this reporter's interview at Nomura's favorite coffee shop, Dobbins came over to shake hands with Nomura to congratulate him for his handling of the

city council meeting the night before.



From left to right: Les Esposito, Wade Nomura, Debbie Nomura, Kim Fly at their favorite coffee shop.

Dobbins is not the only person who regards Nomura's leadership skills highly. The President of the Rotary Club of Carpinteria Sunrise, Kim Fly (52), adds, "Isn't it the Japanese culture? Wade shows his respect to everyone. He is diplomatic. With Wade, people never feel diminished in any way. They feel up-lifted." As the leader of an organization, Wade believes in bottom up leadership rather than top down. His motto is "Leading without Authority."

Today Nomura speaks softly, and his demeanor is always very calm. He was quite different, however, when he was a teenager. "I used to beat up those who didn't listen to me. Just beat them up," he confesses. The big change came when he was 16 years old. He started to learn Judo and Aikido from his uncle who was an Olympian. "He taught me self-discipline and never to be physical," he reflects.

From 2011-12, Nomura served as Rotary District Governor in the Santa Barbara area. Rotary had long been regarded as white men's club, not even allowing women to join until just 30 years ago.

"Even today, at a Rotary meeting, Wade is the only Japanese," says his new wife, Debbie (55). She is from Sydney, Australia, with sky blue eyes. They met at the Rotary International Convention in Toronto in 2018 and got married recently. Even after his governorship, Nomura has continued to do many service projects with Rotary such as clean water projects in Latin America amongst others and has received numerous awards. Of the 1.2 million Rotary members worldwide, Nomura is a rising star. He has been invited to participate in various meetings at the Rotary International headquarters in Chicago. "Wade is representing Nikkei at those meetings because there is no other Japanese American in attendance. Just by being there, he represents Nikkei," explains Debbie.

Another local Rotarian, Les Esposito, who has known Nomura for 25 years adds, "Through Wade, we have learned about the Japanese Americans' internment during WWII and why he values minority's rights and justice so immensely."

Nomura has a special place in his heart for fellow minorities. He had encouraged a Taiwanese American, Roy Lee (37), to run for the City Council. Lee is the owner of the Chinese restaurant Nomura has patronized for the past 19 years. "Wade is my mentor.

He taught me how to run a campaign, what to wear, really everything I needed to know,” says Lee with admiration. With Nomura’s blessings, Lee received an overwhelming majority to become a City Council member last December.

Since he became a Rotarian 17 years ago, Nomura has been involved in the Rotary International Float entered in the Pasadena Rose Parade each year. He does not mind driving 90 minutes one way to attend the monthly Rotary Float meeting in Pasadena. His dedication earned him the honor of being the first Nikkei chair of the Rotary float committee.

For the Rotary International, peace is one of the most important initiatives. Peace Conferences are held every year somewhere in the world with speakers who specialize in issues related to poverty, environment, conflict resolution, disarmament, etc. Nomura is a regular speaker at those peace conferences. Both of his parents were incarcerated in Poston, AZ, during WWII. He talks about the bitter experience his parents had to endure to the mostly white audience.

The Japanese Americans could not return to California immediately after WWII because of the persistent prejudice. When they could come back, many Nisei returned to where they used to live, but Sansei and Yonsei have chosen to live elsewhere, often, places far away from Little Tokyo or other old Nikkei communities. Those Sansei and Yonsei like Nomura have been active in their own communities so the injustice their parents and grandparents had to go through will never be forgotten.



With City Council Member Roy Lee in front of his restaurant.

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