

**Parliament Hill Panelist:  
for the Era 21 Networking Breakfast for Young Canadians**

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Good morning and thank you Senator Poy, Minister Chan, June Girvan, Alek Choo and fellow speakers, and community leaders for your crucial involvement in this early morning networking opportunity. And congratulations to all the young talent chosen to be a part of this incredible experience.

I am grateful and honoured for this opportunity to speak with you. But I must admit that when I was asked to speak, I stopped to ask - Who me? For the past couple of years I have been sitting amongst you as a community leader being wowed by the speakers and the unbelievable young talent sitting at my breakfast table.

In the past, I have worn many hats - I have taken on the role of teacher, actor, performer, artistic director, producer, board member, president and kickboxer (believe it or not, sometimes all at the same time). Quite often, when you are a member of a small cultural community, like the Ottawa Japanese Community, you learn the art of multi-tasking - to be everything to everyone.

But I must admit that my passion to connect with my Japanese heritage has not always been a love-love relationship for me.

Being born in Ottawa to parents who were born in Vancouver, I spent my childhood and most of my teenage years exclaiming confidently and defensively what has now become a famous commercial catch phrase, "I AM CANADIAN!". My parents and my extended family had never even been to Japan, nobody spoke Japanese at home, and just like other Canadians, we didn't really have sushi until it became available in the grocery stores. Even when the Japanese community got together it wasn't to do anything traditionally Japanese, we would go curling or have picnics or barbecues in the park.

Any reference to me being Japanese infuriated me. To me, my only connection to Japan was my name and my physical appearance.

If someone greeted me in Japanese by saying "Konichiwa" with a bow, I would

make a face and clearly say, "Yes, hello, may I help you?" To which I would sometimes get, "Wow, your English is so good." I would just smile and nod making them think that I am some sort of genius...for mastering my mother tongue. It would probably really mess them up if they were to find out that I could speak French, too. However, I could not speak Japanese to save my life.

Although I chose to ignore my own cultural heritage, I somehow developed a healthy curiosity for the world beyond my front door. At age 11, my parents signed me up to join Children's International Summer Villages - an organization that promotes international friendship among youth. I was one of ten children chosen to represent Canada on an exchange with ten children from Italy. For one month, I lived in Rome with an Italian family. This was my first taste of life in a country beyond North America. This experience helped me to appreciate language, different ways of communicating, family dynamics, and group dynamics. It really helped me to see the world in a whole new way.

I came back to Canada saying, "Ciao!" and believing that I was now somehow Italian. Then I realized that I may now be annoying someone of Italian ancestry who has never experienced Italy for themselves.

Perhaps the point in my life when my perspective about my own cultural identity truly changed was when I was in high school. There was an amazing older woman in our Japanese community named Amy Yamasaki. Every community needs an Amy Yamasaki; she was one of those key people that would make things happen. One day, in grand "Godfather" style, she called me to her house for a private meeting over tea and cookies. She pointed to me and said, 'you will create a Japanese Youth Group, and you will be the President'. How could you say no to that?

I finally connected with other Japanese Canadians from different parts of Ottawa. Eventually, the youth group was able to travel across Canada to meet Japanese Canadians in Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg and Vancouver. There was even a Pan-American Nikkei (Japanese) Forum where we met youth from North, South and Central America who were all of Japanese heritage.

It was wild for me to see a Texan who looked Japanese, but was sporting a big cowboy hat and speaking with a southern accent, and then meeting people from Peru who could only speak Spanish and had a parent or grandparent who was Hispanic. The Japanese-Canadians from Vancouver actually spoke their own language which interspersed some Japanese words into their English conversation like slang. They were hip and confident.

On a side note, I now have a nephew who speaks German as his first language. My sister is now officially Swiss after having lived and worked in Switzerland for over a decade. I call her my Swiss sis.

I wonder how my nephew will choose to define himself when he is older.

During this forum not only did I learn about people from different parts of Canada and the world, I finally started to learn more about Japanese Canadian history and everything started to make sense.

First, how many people here are familiar with Canadian WWII history? It still surprises me that we do not officially study this part of Canadian history in school.

If you have not already heard about this, it may surprise you that only a generation ago, this is what happened right here in Canada:

Imagine if you will, the following - you are born in Canada and this country is all that you know.

At age 14 you are hanging out with your friends in high school and suddenly, without reason or warning, you are removed from your class and put in a separate room with all the other students of the same ethnicity for the rest of the school year.

Instantly, without having done anything wrong, you lose your right to an education based on your ethnicity. You must sit and do nothing. You are no longer supposed to speak to your friends.

You are then handed an identification card that identifies you as an 'enemy alien'.

A couple of months later, with only 24 hours notice men over a certain age are removed from their homes and sent to road camps to perform manual labour. Women and children are left to fend for themselves.

Imagine not knowing where your father is being taken and for how long. Fathers were not even allowed to communicate with their families, not even to let them know that they were alive.

A few months after that, the rest of your family is given 24 hrs to pack up and leave everything behind. Over 22,000 Japanese Canadians were put into internment camps of which 75% were Canadian citizens. My mother was also interned and she was only 3 at the time.

Even after the war was over, in the US, Japanese Americans were immediately released and allowed to return to the west coast and to their homes. In contrast, the Canadian government kept Japanese in camps for up to one year following the war and sold all of their property. They were not allowed to return to the west coast; they were given the choice to move east of the Rockies or to 'return to Japan'. Like my father, many had never even been to Japan and could not speak Japanese.

Learning about all of this finally helped me to realize why Japanese Canadians of a certain generation are so disconnected from Japan and Japanese culture.

I remember that there was an Ambassador from Japan who gave a speech to the Japanese community in Ottawa and said how he was disgusted at how 2nd and 3rd generation Japanese Canadians did not retain the Japanese language and said it was a disgrace that even non-Japanese Canadians are able to be fluent in the language.

I always wish that I could have given him a quick history lesson so that he could understand. I would have liked to have explained to him how history has shaped the community. And that despite historical hardships these Canadians have persevered to become leaders like award-winning architect Raymond Moriyama, novelist Joy Kogawa, environmentalist David Suzuki, and MP Bev Oda.

History also gave the community back its voice. A country banned together to make it happen. Remember that this happened before internet, cell phones, Facebook, Twitter or blogs. People picked up the phone and connected, a diversity of communities supported one another across a nation and together they created change. - Redress; A government apology.

It's still hard to believe, but it's pretty remarkable that I am here on Parliament Hill speaking about it. Change is possible.

Following university I actually became hyper-'Japanified' (is that a word?), I went to work in Japan, learned Japanese, took a multitude of Japanese cultural courses, and met distant relatives. I returned to Canada and got involved in almost every single Japanese group and event that existed.

More than anything what has been most rewarding is when I am able to connect with other cultural groups, to share, learn and hopefully laugh together.

My present work at the Canada Council for the Arts is so rewarding because it puts me directly in touch with artists from all different backgrounds from across

the country. And there is no better way to truly give a voice to a community than through art, dance, theatre, spoken word, literature, film and music.

I hope that you will leave here today and find your voice to tell your story.

I am confident that among us here today are our future leaders because just by being here you have recognized the importance of seeking knowledge, creating new ties, and in believing that Diversity plays a key role in shaping our lives and the future of Canada.

I leave you with this final quote: "*Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow.*" - Albert Einstein.

And a quote that I learned from my grandmother - "*When fate hands you a lemon, make lemonade.*" Thank you.