

Telling the American Story

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This month I returned to our nation's museum to serve as Director of the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American (APA) Program. That this month is also Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) Heritage Month only deepens my reverence for the generations of Americans of Asian, Pacific Islander and Native Hawaiian descent who have served this country. The Smithsonian Institution plays an important role in telling this story through our collections, research, exhibitions, education and public engagement.

Nearly 15 years ago, the Smithsonian Institution created the APA Program from a recommendation by the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American National Advisory Group. The Advisory Group was composed of leading members of our AAPI communities and chaired by the Honorable Norman Mineta, an American known for his decades of public service and congressional action to create an AAPI heritage month. The goal of the Smithsonian APA Program was to help us recognize and preserve the rich diversity that composes the American story. Today, we continue to build bridges of mutual respect and understanding of the diversity of the American experience and world cultures.

The founding of the Smithsonian APA Program and Mr. Mineta's own journey symbolizes the importance of AAPI Heritage Month in celebrating our national culture. Mr. Mineta's story opens with the blemish of Executive Order 9066, which relocated Japanese Americans to internment camps, but then blossoms with his decades of service as a Mayor, Congressman, Smithsonian Regent and finally, Secretary of Commerce and Secretary of Transportation in both Democratic and Republican administrations. Last year, the Smithsonian APA Program commissioned and presented a portrait of Mr. Mineta to the National Portrait Gallery because his story tells our nation's story through history, art and culture.

Mr. Mineta is one of America's many exceptional stories; the list is long. But for every story like Mr. Mineta or ones like my congressional representatives from Hawai'i such as Senator Daniel Akaka or Senator Daniel Inouye or the beloved Congresswoman Patsy Mink, there are many more young children across this country wondering how they can rise from adversity and improve the lives of others through service. For these future leaders, AAPI Heritage Month and the Smithsonian APA Program can offer parables to live by, points of empathy and roles to play in the next great chapter of the American story.

Happy AAPI Heritage Month.

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