

In MEMORIAM

Friends, Colleagues Celebrate Mike Watanabe

Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass toplines tribute to life, legacy of late AADAP stalwart.

By P.C. Staff

The breadth and depth of the diversity of cultures, faces and faiths — American, Black, Hawaiian, Hispanic, Japanese and white, Buddhist and Christian — of those in the pews and giving eulogies on the stage bore witness to the boundary-crossing, impactful life of Michael Norio Watanabe.

The celebration of life for Mike Watanabe, as he was known to most, took place at Holman United Methodist Church, not far from his home in Los Angeles' Crenshaw District on May 23.

The longtime leader of Asian American Drug Abuse Program, aka AADAP, died Nov. 3, 2023, at 77. The gathering was the embodiment of AADAP's credo: People need people.

Celebration of Life



Cover of Mike Watanabe's celebration of life booklet

With master of ceremonies duties ably discharged by AADAP board member and retired All People's Community Cen-

ter Executive Director Sandra Bryant, the list of performers — a Hawaiian opening by the Kaio Foundation, a rendition of "A Thousand Cranes" by kotoist June Kuramoto, a performance of "Lands of the Rising Sun" sung by "Atomic" Nancy Sekizawa — and speakers — including Baptist Pastor Louis Lewis, Buddhist Rev. Ray Fukumoto, nephew Ed Shioyazono Richter, Professor Herman DeBose, Ron Wakabayashi, Nick Nagatani, Yvette Enrique (AADAP Therapeutic Community alumna) and Jose Esqueda (director of Youth and Programs) and Elaine "Yoko" Takahashi — was a testament to the far-reaching impact of Watanabe's life's work at AADAP.

He spent 46 years at the organization, 39 as its president and CEO, until stepping aside



Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass fondly remembers her late friend Mike Watanabe at his celebration of life held May 23.

PHOTO: GEORGE TOSHIO JOHNSTON

in 2021.

Born Aug. 23, 1946, in Pa'uailo, Hawaii, in 1957, Watanabe's family and he moved to Los Angeles, where he would graduate from Venice High School, where he was known for his prowess in gymnastics, in 1964. After serving a perspective-changing two-and-a-half years in the Army, including a yearlong tour of duty in Vietnam where he was a helicopter door gunner and mechanic circa 1969, he earned a B.A. from California State University, Northridge, followed by a master's in social work from UCLA. In 2017, CSUN awarded him an honorary doctor of humane letters.

During his years at AADAP, Watanabe's greater community involvement also included serving as president of Asian Pacific Policy & Planning Council, in which he oversaw its Drug, Alcohol and Tobacco Committee; serving on the L.A. County Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs Commission and the Asian and Pacific Islander Constituent Committee; and as a founder of the National Asian Pacific Families Against Substance Abuse.

If the measure of Watanabe's reach was exemplified by the stature of who came to pay tribute to his life and achievements, none was bigger than that of Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass. In 2022, at AADAP's 50th anniversary, then U.S. Rep. Bass was the recipient of the Mike Watanabe Leadership Award (*see Oct. 7, 2022, Pacific Citizen, [tinyurl.com/2f5w8c3f](https://www.pacificcitizen.com/2f5w8c3f)*).

"The impact that he's had on all of our lives will go on and on and on through generations, and I was just honored that I had the opportunity to come here today and once again share the impact that Mike Watanabe had on me," Bass said. She was not alone in her assessment of the halo effect her friend's life had on others.

Bryant: "Mike was not a selfish leader. He understood that his gifts should be shared with

the entire community. He mentored many, including myself, he invited me to events, meetings fundraisers and introduced me to movers and shakers."

Nakanishi: "Mike treated the AADAP staff as his family, no matter if you were a new staff member or worked here for many years. He raised so many of us to be the community leaders we are today."

Enrique: "For me, Mike was more than a CEO of AADAP. He has been a mentor, a role model most of all, an inspiration. Mike has been a driving force for me in my transformation from being an addict for 23 years to where I am today."

Richter: "He led by example, having overcome his own challenges."

Lewis: "Today, we're celebrating one who has been such a blessing to all of us as a mentor, as a friend — so many life lessons."

Fukumoto: "The causes and conditions of this gathering is a gift we have received from Mike, for without him, today's gathering would not be possible."

Nagatani: "Mike, I thank you for creating bridges to bring our communities closer together — and for myself, for helping me change my outlook."

DeBose: "When Mike and Susie got married, Mike asked me to serve as his best man. At that point, I realized that he saw me as a true friend. . . . Our primary friendship has been centered on the desire, I think, to make the world a better place for those who are less fortunate than us."

Esqueda: "He was a mentor, a friend, a coach and a great co-worker. I will always honor and cherish Mike's teachings and always be grateful for the opportunity to be all I could be at AADAP."

Wakabayashi: "He's been gone for a few months, but his superpower was still to be able to bring us together, and he's done it again today."

Watanabe is survived by his widow, Suzanne, and other family and friends. ■



(Clockwise from top left) Pastor Louis Lewis, Rev. Ray Fukumoto, Ron Wakabayashi, Yvette Enrique, Nick Nagatani, Nancy Sekizawa, Jose Esqueda and Dean Nakanishi

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