

IMPACT! The Final National Youth Conference By Carrie Kimura

I was a little nervous before arriving at the welcome desk for the JACL National Youth Conference on June 26th. Neither my travel companion, Kristen Shiraki, or I had much experience with JACL events or had ever attended one of the previous youth conventions. We knew the theme of the conference, 'IMPACT! Your Community, Your Generation, Your JACL'. We knew it was going to be held at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota, far from our hometown of San Jose, California. We had no idea how many participants were registered or where they were from. We figured it would be an experience, but we had no clue what to expect. I am pleased to say that we were shocked at what we found waiting in Minnesota under that welcome banner at the registration desk.

Upon arrival, we received our room keys, meal passes, and welcome bags, but were told we could not check into our rooms until 3:00pm. It was around noon, so this forced us to look around and try to meet some new people. It literally took seconds for that to happen. Kristen and I were almost immediately absorbed by a growing group of early participants from all across the country. The time we spent with these new friends until 4:00pm when registration ended was the most 'free time' we had during the whole conference. Everything past registration was structured by a tight agenda that fit as many speeches, program events, networking activities, and workshops into each day as possible.

Our first official meal was held in the college's cafeteria. This setting reinforced our role as students at the conference, whether the participants were currently enrolled in courses or not. Everyone present was there to learn something more about their culture and history, the JACL organization, and even their futures. The events scheduled for the rest of the conference were certain to teach us all about those three things.

The events of the first day focused mostly on learning about each other. Dinner was casual and social and a lot of introductions were made. That was followed by the Opening Program and Ice Cream Social. The Opening Program was our introduction to the convention and included a stirring speech from Senator Mee Moua on the perpetual foreign identity of Asian Americans. The inspiring nature of her speech and appreciation for her welcome was evident in the standing ovation she received. These remaining events were packed with icebreakers and social networking activities. Being forced to learn your teammates names and favorite colors or animals in record time definitely had our minds racing! We all had a good laugh in the spirit of 'embracing the awkwardness' as we moved through each icebreaking activity. The Taste of NY/SC networking event was held in the dorms at the end of the night and was much more relaxed. We were asked to wear something that identified where we were from and it gave participants a chance to wind down and become better acquainted with one another.

The second day began bright and early with breakfast in the cafeteria at 7:30am, followed by the Ultimate Challenge, an outdoors activity meant to foster camaraderie and teach participants to cooperate with one another in an efficient way. We ran through three

separate race activities that got us to step out of our bubbles of personal space, get dirty and have fun. It really got our blood pumping early in the day and woke everyone up! After cleaning up, (some of us ended up in the mud at some point during the races) we moved right into the first workshop. My first was Midwest JA History. Kristen's was Fellows: A Walk in Their Shoes. We can both say that we learned a lot from those workshops and Kristen has even been inspired to apply for a fellowship after college.

We got down to business in the next portion of the conference, which focused on networking. We learned good practices and tips for networking from Craig Ishii and Brandon Mita during the Networking Activity and had a chance to put our new skills to use before going to lunch. At the Meishi Exchange Luncheon, we began networking for real with professionals in multiple fields of expertise. These two events were actually my favorite part of the conference because of how much the participants learned and how quickly they were allowed to put that new knowledge to use in the real world, with the possibility of making connections that would affect their futures.

After the luncheon, it was back to the workshops. Kristen and I both attended After College and Can JACL Be Fun? The After College workshop was an introduction to the Nakayoshi organization, a place in the JACL for young professionals. Nakayoshi was formed in response to the need of youth members that had already graduated college and were entering the workforce and serves as a place to make friends and get involved if you're over 21 years old. Our final workshop gave a brief introduction to our JACL organization and moved swiftly into the potential it, and every one of its members has to change the world around us. The workshop was split between a presentation on ideas for community involvement and the formation of youth programs and an actual breakdown of how to start your own programs. I personally learned a great deal from these two workshops and am eager to put what I learned to use here in San Jose.

The Sayonara Banquet was a formal dinner where we heard from our second Keynote Speaker: Amado Uno. He spoke at length about civil rights and gave specific examples of labor unions, which made an impression on the participants. His compelling speech gave us all a lot to think about and opened our eyes to a world we may not have been as likely to see otherwise.

The final event of the night was the Talent Show. I think anyone who was there can tell you that it wasn't what they expected. All participants were split into teams and came up with their own skits on events of the conference. These were performances you'd have to see yourself to appreciate and they've all been added online to Facebook! I still don't envy the judges that night; every team's skit was amazingly funny, especially when you consider that there was very little time to come up with each one.

The final day began at 7:30am with another breakfast in the cafeteria, immediately followed by the third and final Keynote Speaker: Shin Inouye. Everyone I spoke to was particularly excited to hear him and we all did our very best to stay awake for him. If you didn't already know, Shin Inouye works for President Obama. He gave us a detailed look into his own life before he reached the White House, from his school life to making the

first steps to the top. He explained a lot about his own job dealing with the press and told us what it was like to meet the President for the first time. After his talk, he held a Q&A session and made sure that everyone got their questions answered. It was an amazing way to end the conference. Kudos to our coordinators for arranging such wonderful speakers.

I was as sad to leave at the end of the conference as I had been anxious before it began. Kristen and I both made some great friends and connections that we know we will have the rest of our lives, we learned a lot about ourselves and our fellow JAs, and maybe most of all, we were inspired by everyone we heard. We were inspired to make a difference in our community, wherever that may be, to hold ourselves to a higher standard as people and Americans, and to stay involved and become even more involved in the JACL. If it wasn't before, it's obvious now that the JACL has a lot to offer its youth members and we have a lot to give back in return. Though there won't be another National Youth Convention, I can't wait to attend the National Convention in Chicago.