

# COMFORT WOMEN MONUMENT UNVEILED IN GLENDALE

NCRR gives statement of support.

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Bok-dong Kim, who spoke of her experiences as a comfort woman, sits next to a statue representing the young Korean women who were victimized. (MARIO G. REYES/Rafu Shimpo)

GLENDALE — With hundreds of onlookers pressing in for a look, the City of Glendale on Tuesday unveiled a monument in Central Park dedicated to the Korean “comfort women” of World War II.

Participating in the dedication of the life-size statue of a young girl — seated next to an empty chair representing the victims who have died — were the Glendale City Council, Nikkei for Civil Rights & Redress, and a former comfort woman, 87-year-old Bok-dong Kim, who was affectionately referred to as *halmoni* (grandmother) by her supporters.

“As I look at it, it reminds me of my young age when I was abducted,” Kim said through an interpreter, adding, “ My only hope is that before we die — we don’t have much time left — Japan comes forward and offers official apology and reparations.”

After the unveiling, Kim sat in the empty chair and held hands with the statue. Both Kim and the statue were given leis, and Kim received a miniature version of the monument.

The inscription reads, “In memory of more than 200,000 Asian and Dutch women who were removed from their homes in Korea, China, Taiwan, Japan, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, East Timor and Indonesia, to be coerced into sexual slavery by the Imperial Armed Forces of Japan between 1932 and 1945.

“And in celebration of proclamation of ‘Comfort Women Day’ by the City of Glendale on July 30, 2012, and of passing of House Resolution 121 by the United States Congress on July 30, 2007, urging the Japanese government to accept historical responsibility for these crimes.

“It is our sincere hope that these unconscionable violations of human rights shall never recur.”

H.R. 121 was originally drafted by Rep. Mike Honda of San Jose, who was not present at Tuesday’s ceremony but addressed participants via video during a reception before the ceremony.

NCCR recording secretary Janice Yen recalled Honda speaking about the issue at an event in the late 1990s, before the story of the comfort women was widely discussed.

“He came to speak about what an atrocity it was, so we’ve known about it for quite some time, but there hasn’t been a whole lot of publicity about it until now,” Yen said.

Over strong objections from Japan and local Japanese residents, the City Council approved the monument on July 9. International interest in the issue was reflected by the dozens of journalists covering the ceremony. Other monuments

to the comfort issue have been dedicated in New Jersey, and the Glendale statue is a replica of the one that stands across the street from the Japanese Embassy in Seoul.

No members of Congress attended, but statements of support were read by Qiao Li on behalf of Rep. Adam Schiff (D-Burbank) and by Young Kim on behalf of Rep. Ed Royce (R-Fullerton). Kim noted that efforts to erect similar monuments are under way in Orange County and elsewhere in the U.S.

There was little protest or demonstration from either side at the unveiling, although one man, C.Y. Kao, brought a large picture of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe with a swastika superimposed on it.

Bok-dong Kim said a full apology and recognition by the Japanese government of what happened would go a long way toward easing the lingering pain of herself and women like her. Addressing Abe, she remained steadfast that an apology is essential.

“If you, as the prime minister, are representing a country, you have to make an apology for the past, even if it was committed by the former emperor of your country,” she insisted.

Calling the unveiling “a moment of pride for the City of Glendale,” Councilmember Ara Najarian said, “I heard Grandma Kim explain the pain and the horrors that she and many other young Korean girls went through ... We are hoping that today’s monument will be a part of the healing process ... This is one small step that we, the people of the City of Glendale, can do to honor the memories of those who have perished and those still alive who have survived the tragedies of the Korean comfort women.”

Speaking as the grandson of an Armenian genocide survivor, Councilmember Zareh Sinanyan said, “I understand the pain, I understand the horror that the victims ... The best way to resolve conflicts ... the best way to heal wounds ... is to acknowledge them ... My people, my grandfather, were subjected to a horrible, horrible crime ... To this day, because no apology has come, no proper acknowledgement has come ... the wound is deep, it’s festering, and there can be no moving forward without it.”

Councilmember Laura Friedman stated, “This is a very special day for all of the people of Glendale to be the first city on the West Coast to host a Korean comfort woman memorial. We had a lot of pressure at City Council to not install this memorial. We had hundreds and hundreds of emails opposed to this memorial. But history and truth cannot be denied, they cannot be suppressed, and this monument is a testament to that.

“It’s also a testament to the will of the Korean people in Los Angeles to tell this important story, to make sure that nothing like this happens again. Today the City of Glendale stands united with its Korean population, it stands united with the truth, it stands united with the victims of sexual violence around the world, and the innocent victims of any war that has taken place.”



Kathy Masaoka speaks for Nikkei for Civil Rights & Redress with other members standing behind her. (MARIO G. REYES/Rafu Shimpo)

Councilmember Frank Quintero, who recently visited the monument in Seoul, thanked everyone who worked on the project and emphasized that Japanese Americans have been “in the background, working with us ... Mike Honda, a Japanese American, introduced a measure in Congress that was successful in dealing with this issue ... The Japanese American community of California, Americans of Japanese descent born in the United States ... they are with the community ... with the City of Glendale. I want to thank them very much.”

Kathy Masaoka spoke on behalf of NCRP, which was established to fight for redress and an official apology for Japanese Americans incarcerated without due process during World War II. “We learned many lessons during the 10-year campaign ... We also learned about others who were facing similar discrimination both in this country and in Japan. In 1988, we were invited to support Koreans and other minorities in Japan who were fighting the fingerprinting required of all aliens, even those born there.

“We met ordinary Japanese activists and citizens who were supporting efforts to remove this law, and later were asked to support the Chinese slave laborers who were suing the Japanese government for their treatment in the Hanaoka mines during World War II. Again, the government denied any responsibility and instead placed total blame on the company that ran the mine, Kajima, which did have some responsibility.”

Masaoka pledged that NCRR “will continue to support the Korean comfort women’s demand for an apology and individual reparations from the Japanese government and understands how important both the apology and reparations are. Japan has said that they settled all claims when they paid reparations as part of the peace treaties after the war, but these did not go to the comfort women. The United States also stated that they settled all of its issues with the Japanese American community with the Evacuation Claims Act of 1948, which paid individuals 10 cents on the dollar for loss of property, but only if they had receipts — and most did not.

“Some say that Japan has paid reparations through the Asian Women’s Fund, but only 285 women from South Korea, Taiwan and the Philippines have gotten money. Most consider it charity since the funds come mainly from private sources and (are) not a sincere acknowledgement of responsibility by the Japanese government. And although various prime ministers have expressed some kind of apology, it has not been directly to the comfort women, nor has it been strong enough to prevent other officials from denying their existence, and some have even justified it ...

“When the U.S. government passed the Civil Liberties Act 25 years ago, it helped to heal the pain of those who had suffered in America’s concentration camps and showed that this country can admit its mistakes. When Japan sincerely apologizes and pays reparations to each of the comfort women before it is too late, it will help these survivors heal and show that Japan has learned from its past.

“This monument to the comfort women is also a reminder to all of us that the abuse and trafficking of women into forced prostitution or domestic slavery continues today, even in this country.”

Inside the Glendale Central Library, a display about the comfort women is on view to tell the stories of the women involved, from countries including South Korea, Taiwan and the Philippines.

Jean Chung is president of Action for One Korea, an organization she founded to work toward the reunification of North and South Korea. She said the U.S. is a stakeholder in the comfort women issue, despite the fact that the U.S. had little direct involvement, mainly due to the postwar decision not to pursue war crimes charges against Japan.

“There was a threat of communism at the time, and Japan was a potential buffer against it, so they decided not to punish Japan,” Chung explained. “Because of that, the U.S. is involved.”

Chung added that the social humiliation suffered by the comfort women essentially kept them from discussing their ordeals until South Korea experienced wide-scale democratization in the late 1990s. She said lingering nationalist tendencies in both Korea and Japan have made the issue a difficult one to analyze objectively for many people.

“The older generation in Korea feels we should hate everything about Japan, but here in the United States, we can see history remotely as a third party, so we have to be the foundation for reconciliation,” she said. “We can’t fight forever.”



Janice Yen of NCRR looks at the exhibit on comfort women in the Glendale Central Library. (MIKEY HIRANO CULROSS/Rafu Shimpo)