**HERITAGE SPEECH**

**FOR**

**FRANK DESEO**

Hello everyone!!! Every year, as the month of May rolls around, I find myself anticipating its arrival with great pleasure and considerable pride. Of course every month holds its distinctions but May is special.... Is it because we can breathe a sigh of relief since we lived through yet another tax preparation season (**Wait for the laugh**)?? Is it because we get to celebrate a special day set aside to honor our mothers, wives, daughters, and female friends throughout the United States??? That could be it.... or is it the reason why we are all gathered here today??? I’m pretty sure **THAT’s** the reason!!! Each year since 1977, thanks to the tireless work of people like Reps Frank Horton of New York and Norman Mineta of California and the resolution drafted in the House, along with the combined efforts of Hawaii’s Senators Daniel Inoue and Spark Matsunaga, Pacific/Asian American Week was born... and because there was clearly a great deal to acknowledge and so much to celebrate, with more than a little enthusiasm reverberating from around our great country, President George H. W. Bush signed the bill to extend the celebration from just one week to the entire month of May.... and here we are... with pride, purpose, and more than a little preponderance of steadily increasing visibility and impact on every area of our lives, we honor the Pacific Island and Asian American men and women whose achievements, skills, dedication, and integrity have contributed immensely to the greatness of the United States.

The first arrival of Japanese immigrants is believed to have occurred on May 7, 1843, fueled by news of the Gold Rush. Another milestone that commemorated the importance of May as the keystone of Asian immigration was the completion of the transcontinental railroad on May 10, 1869. It is believed that the majority of workers on that pivotal, shape shifting, defining moment in American history, were in fact, Chinese immigrants. I think it’s safe to say that they most probably worked diligently, tirelessly, and almost anonymously to build the network that literally connected this country. Since then, the contributions made by Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders have become an enduring, inseparable homage to the strength that is America,

While we who go about our daily lives as card carrying, productive and proud citizens and members of our respective communities, there had, is, and always will be, a cultural shortfall in understanding and accepting diversity.... which is another reason why May is so important to all of us. The comedienne, Margaret Cho, no shy stranger when it comes to bridging the gap between her Korean parents and contemporary American culture, manages to find a way to infuse humor and humanity into the often demonstrable lack of understanding of those outside the community. She tells of a story... one time she was being interviewed on television, on a morning show, and the host had to take a commercial break...She very politely turned to Margaret and said, “We’re changing over to a local affiliate, Margaret, why don’t you tell our viewers in your native language that we’re making that transition?” Of course Ms. Cho, with all her wit, wisdom, and more than adequate dose of snark said, “Um...they’re changing to an ABC affiliate...” (**Wait for the laugh**). There’s a lesson to be learned in that anecdote.... do your research... and don’t underestimate Margaret Cho... or anyone else for that matter!! (**Wait for the laugh**).

It’s been just about one hundred and seventy six years since those first Japanese immigrants set foot on American soil. Through the years the culture and contribution of Asian American and Pacific Islanders has grown, and because of that, America has grown too. According to reports, as of 2017, over **TWENTY TWO MILLION** Asian Americans live in the United States. Chinese, Filipino, Indian, Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese, Thai, and numerous other cultures form the group that has significantly changed the landscape of American life. With distinguished contributors in every area of life, industry, and community, it is unimaginable to define the United States without the presence of rich traditions, tastes, and heritage we have graciously brought with us.

According to counts in 2019, there are thirteen members of the House of Representatives and three senators that claim Asian American or Pacific Islander heritage. We’ve come a long way since 1900 when Hawaii was the first territory to send a representative, albeit non-voting, to Congress...And it only took **FIFTY-NINE YEARS** to send the first Asian American to the Senate. The good news is that our voices and impact on government have increased tremendously... the **BETTER** news is that there is **TREMENDOUS** opportunity to grow our impact and outreach on every branch of our government. It is thanks to these annual commemorations that we have the wherewithal to achieve greater awareness of our position and trajectory throughout life in our American home and we have the chance to assess the opportunities to increase our participation to find the ways to serve our unique and diverse cultures and communities while forging connections and bonds with our neighbors.

There isn’t a corner or area in the United States that is not affected by the impact and contribution of our fellow Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. ... our televisions and movie theaters would be a lot less exciting minus the efforts and talents of people like Margaret Cho, Ali Wong, David Henry Hwang, Bruno Mars.... Eddie Van Halen... **YES**!!! Van Halen’s father was Indonesian!! Our cityscapes would be a lot less dynamic without the work of Maya Lin and the late I. M. Pei. Our appetites would never be slaked without the culinary contributions of people like David Chang, Martin Yan, and Roy Choi.... (**If you want to make a joke you can say**).... well... let’s put it this way... **we** always had and have the advantage of partaking in the home cooking we all grew up with... it’s every one else that would miss out... I mean... what’s a city or town in America without a sushi bar, a great Chinese restaurant, adobo, or some incredible pho or ramen??? (**And wait for the laugh**).

Literature would be less exciting... law would be less inclusive and compassionate, journalism would be less incisive, and science and medicine would be far less advanced without the ingenuity and determination of people that share our heritage. Eugene Trina was the first Vietnamese American in outer space. Apolo Anton Ono mesmerized the world in **THREE** Olympics winning **EIGHT** gold medals and a World Cup championship, and then of course, there’s Tiger Woods... yes... he is of Thai descent.

Each unique Asian culture has inspired and enriched our lives here in America. Though we’ve chosen to live in a place far from our roots, those roots and traditions are implanted deep within us. We believe in the importance of family. We honor and respect our elders. We practice our faith as we see fit while honoring the western ways and traditions we have helped to endure. While America has, for over a century, been known as the “melting pot,” it is through the contributions of Asian Americans that we keep that pot filled with diverse and delicious nourishment for the heart, the soul, the stomach, and the brain.

Here’s to the continued and rich celebration of our honored and diverse cultures. Here’s to living in a country that accepts our unique gifts. Here’s to a United States that continues to acknowledge and honor the incredible contributions of Pacific Island and Asian Americans. (**Do you want to say thank you in different Asian languages?**

**If so**)... Mahalo (Hawaiian)... gamsahabnida (Korean)... Arigato (Japanese) ...Khop Kuhn Mak Kha (Thai)... Thank you all!!