

Bruce T. Kaji

Legacy Award



BRUCE TERUO KAJI is the founding president of the Japanese American National Museum. It is not an exaggeration to acknowledge that without his efforts during the early organizing of the institution, the museum may never have been created. A partner in a Little Tokyo accountancy practice and president of Merit Savings & Loan, Kaji envisioned a museum building as part of a proposed development at First and Alameda streets.

As a prisoner in the Manzanar concentration camp during World War II and a member of the Military Intelligence Service (MIS) during the Occupation of Japan, Kaji understood firsthand both the discrimination his community endured and the outstanding military service that Japanese Americans had contributed. It was a story that was not well known or documented, so his push for a Japanese American museum to honor and teach that history was laudable.

Born in the Bunker Hill district and raised in Boyle Heights, Kaji returned to Los Angeles after the Occupation and earned his degree in accounting from the University of Southern California. After forming Kaji & Maruyama, CPA, an accounting partnership with Kiyu Maruyama, Kaji's firm landed a major client in Toyota Motor Sales, U.S.A., Inc., although its first import, the Toyopet Crown, was less than a success. Kaji also pursued public service and was elected city treasurer of Gardena in 1960. It was then that he developed strong relations with Los Angeles city and county officials such as County Supervisor Kenneth Hahn and City Councilman Gilbert Lindsay. After the City of Los Angeles used eminent domain to take possession of an eight-acre block of Little Tokyo to build its police department headquarters, Kaji and the Rev. Howard Toriumi of Union Church led the fight to establish the Little Tokyo Redevelopment Association to help protect their community.

Bruce (who adopted his English first name as a child, after Bruce Wayne of "Batman" fame) married Frances Tashiro in 1954. Frances was the daughter of prominent physician Dr. Kikuwo Tashiro, who founded the Japanese Hospital of Los Angeles in 1927. Kaji, who learned to play the trumpet in Manzanar and played with the band, the Jive Bombers, wrote his autobiography, *Jive Bomber: A Sentimental Journey*, in 2010.

The **JANM Legacy Award** was established to recognize individuals and organizations that have made a lasting contribution to the museum's institutional legacy and helped to distinguish the museum as a unique, vital, and valuable community resource.