

**The Blooming Fields: Histories of Asian American Communities in Long Beach & Their
Political Representation**

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Asian communities have an extensive relationship associated with Long Beach, California that reflected large events that transpired in history. Vast amounts of Chinese immigrants at the height of the California gold rush in 1848 were among the first few Asian groups in Long Beach. Many Chinese immigrants came in search of gold or other economic opportunities that were severely affected by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882¹, the first federal law that criminalized the entrance to the US based on race and set precedents for states to enact similar local policies. Long Beach even passed an ordinance in 1887 that banned Chinese laundries - a common service many immigrants who did not flourish in the gold industry entered - that resulted in relocation outside of the city limits.² “Yellow Peril” became increasingly more apparent with California’s passage of the Alien Land Law of 1913 that prohibited “aliens ineligible for citizenship” from owning or holding long-term leases.³ Pushing Asian Americans out of the real estate market created further hardships to Japanese flower and produce farmers in the agricultural fields that surrounded Long Beach and significantly impacted their socio-economic status. These waves of Asian immigration perpetuated xenophobia and racism, which continued to fuel anti-Asian legislation and rhetoric at both the federal and state levels. This in turn continues to affect the Asian American diaspora and the demographics of Long Beach Asian communities over time. The Japanese were the next ethnic group to immigrate into the US and Long Beach respectively. Their community was heavily concentrated in Rancho Los Alamitos and dubbed “Little Tokyo” as a result of the influx of Japanese immigrants.⁴ Many consisted of farmers and small business owners on rented or shared land. The first generation of Japanese

¹ Chinese Exclusion Act, 22 Stat. 58 (1882), <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/chinese-exclusion-act>.

² Historic Resources Group, *Historic Context Statement: Suburbanization & Race*, (Long Beach: Long Beach Development Services, 2022), 16.

³ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 117.

immigrants are referred to as *Issei*, or anyone born between 1890-1924. The second generation of Japanese Americans were US citizens by birthright and referred to as *Nisei*, and referred to those born in the Great Depression and World War II Era: 1910-1940. Multi-generational families of *Issei* and *Nisei* worked as grocers and other agricultural food businesses such as Charles Nobuichi Yamagata (1886-1957), Mary Asako Yamagata, and their son George K. Yamagata (1911-1973). The Yamagata's owned a fruit business that appears in the Long Beach City Directory of 1922 and in total had three stores by 1935: one on E. 4th Street, E. 7th Street, and E. 2nd Street.⁵

Although it seems as if Asian communities like the Japanese had flourished despite discriminatory land laws passed against them, extensive measures against the Japanese became apparent in 1942. As the US declared war on Japan in December 1941 after the bombing in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, large concentrations of Asian communities had entered Hawaii as contracted sugar plantation laborers, including Chinese and Japanese immigrants that displaced natives Hawaiians. Few who finished their contracts and stayed in Hawaii opened small businesses such as farms, orchards, and fishing as they did in mainland California. However, in response to the attack on Pearl Harbor and a swelling fear of national security, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942, that excluded civilians from military areas.⁶ General John L. DeWitt enforced this order exclusively on Japanese Americans and affected their community in Long Beach. The Long Beach Naval complex was home to the Pacific fleet, complete with a station and shipyard for many sailors. Since Order 9066 excluded civilians from

⁵ Ibid., 117.

⁶ National Archives, "Executive Order 9066: Resulting in Japanese-American Incarceration (1942)" *National Archives*, [https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/executive-order-9066#:~:text=Executive%20Order%209066%3A%20Resulting%20in%20Japanese%2DAmerican%20Incarceration%20\(1942\),-EnlargeDownload%20Link&text=Citation%3A%20Executive%20Order%209066%2C%20February,Record%20Group%2011%3B%20National%20Archives](https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/executive-order-9066#:~:text=Executive%20Order%209066%3A%20Resulting%20in%20Japanese%2DAmerican%20Incarceration%20(1942),-EnlargeDownload%20Link&text=Citation%3A%20Executive%20Order%209066%2C%20February,Record%20Group%2011%3B%20National%20Archives).

military areas, Long Beach was thus no longer a home for the Japanese American community. Many were at first encouraged to evacuate voluntarily, but those who didn't were forcibly evacuated and detained under Public Proclamation No. 4.⁷ Japanese-American residents on the West Coast were only given a 48-hour notice and fined those who didn't comply regardless of their American citizenship. Thousands of families were forced to abandon their homes and businesses and relocated without compensation upon their return, severely harming their community post-war. This marks a significant shift in Long Beach Asian communities by stunting the growth and dispersing the Japanese community upon their return.

Significant urban changes in Long Beach affected ethnic communities before, during, and after the war. The early 20th century saw many African Americans migrating out of Southern states and relocating in the North, Midwest, and even Long Beach, California because of newly available jobs⁸ and in search of areas that were less racist. Simultaneously, FDR's New Deal in the 1930s created public housing for civilians who were not working in defense. The federal government funded housing projects that created separate developments for African Americans, created segregated buildings dependent on race, and excluded African Americans entirely from residing in certain projects. Those within the defense industry had housing funded through the Lanham Act but exclusively applied to Whites, leaving African Americans to find housing in the severely pre-existing, congested Black areas.⁹ The city of Long Beach eventually did provide housing for military and civilian workers with the Cabrillo Homes War Emergency Housing Complex that was split into three, and the third complex that was preserved for African

⁷ National Archives, "Japanese-American Incarceration During World War II" *National Archives*, <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/japanese-relocation#:~:text=On%20March%2029%2C%201942%2C%20under,on%20a%2048%2Dhour%20notice.>

⁸ Historic Resources Group, 27.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

Americans were temporary units. Other housing initiatives of the New Deal were the Home Owners Loan Corporations (HOLC, 1933) and the Federal Housing Administration (FHA, 1934) that encouraged Americans to buy and own homes during the Great Depression that focused on the White community only.¹⁰ The FHA appraised property to determine what areas had lower risks of default and included a “Whites only” requirement and implied to appraisers that those of other racial and nationality groups should be recommended against and to discourage loans in older, urban neighborhoods. The agencies thus began rating neighborhoods as “security risks” and created a racial ranking of neighborhoods that placed African American, Mexican, and Asian neighborhoods at the bottom.¹¹ Neighborhood maps were color-coded and ranked by “residential security”, where areas considered to be in full decline were rejected mortgage insurance and barred from federal assistance were colored red, creating the term “redlining” around communities of color. The redlined areas in Long Beach were drawn directly over historically marginalized groups, including African Americans, Latinos, and the soon interned Japanese Americans that dictated where Asian communities were allowed to own property or live well past the war.

As WWII transpired and came to a close, the Long Beach Douglas Aircraft plant and ship-building industry at the port created a high demand for workers and resulted in a large population boom of African Americans. Not only were they occupying the Cabrillo projects, some soldiers returning from war brought Japanese-born Navy wives to these military housing projects.¹² Many service members returning home with the GI Bill also had hopes of buying homes that they earned through service, but were even then still denied by private covenants and

¹⁰ Ibid., 22.

¹¹ Ibid., 22.

¹² Ibid., 27.

lending practices by the financial institutions that made and served GI loans, barring them from owning land. Even the annexation of the East Side of Long Beach post-war excluded any community of color from populating them, reserving the privileges for White homeowners.¹³

As the federal, state, and city government and officials bar communities of color from land ownership, a severe socio-economic deficiency arises. The unequal distributions of wealth between White and communities of color became a basis of friction between Black, Latina/o, and Asian communities, and even within the racial and ethnic communities themselves. After incarceration, a majority of Japanese Americans in the US didn't return to their neighborhoods they lived in prior to the war and became severely displaced. Those returning to Long Beach were initially housed in 400 trailers at the Los Cerritos Trailer Court since many who tried to find housing in the city were faced with both racial discrimination and low vacancy rates.¹⁴ Their living conditions at Los Cerritos saw no improvement from the time they had left since the Court was built as emergency housing in 1943 which included places to meet or recreate. Community organizing became central to addressing these issues. Led by volunteer Rollin McGroarty, they lobbied for a community hall that was being used for storage to be cleaned out and used for social and recreational purposes.¹⁵ This community hall became the center of the Court and was used by Japanese Americans living at Truman Boyd Manor Federal Public Housing Project, illustrating the importance of community advocacy. McGroarty also encouraged the formation of the Los Cerritos Residents' Tenant Council and was founded by Kenji Ito, Helen Hutton, Tommy Enomoto, and Frances Uchida.¹⁶ This opportunity helped familiarize the Japanese community with self-organization to support one another, spurring other organizations to hold

¹³ Ibid., 28.

¹⁴ Ibid., 108.

¹⁵ Ibid., 108.

¹⁶ Ibid., 109.

meetings in the hall like the Japanese American Citizens' League (JACL). By September 1946, only 150 of the 400 trailers at the Los Cerritos Trailer Court were still being used as living spaces for Japanese Americans.¹⁷ Some were involved in gardening, but many did not have the social or financial capital to open or re-open businesses after internment. For instance, the Ishii family came to Long Beach in 1908 and started a retail floral business in 1917 where brothers Frank and Joe Ishii worked before incarceration and were able to reopen in 1947-1977.¹⁸ Years after incarceration, retail businesses became concentrated on the Westside along Santa Fe Avenue.

Some Japanese Americans were able to purchase homes in the integrated Westside, and by 1960, Westside was 9% Asian (Japanese and some Filipino residents).¹⁹ After the Truman Boyd and Cabrillo Homes, many Japanese moved out of Long Beach and into existing enclaves such as San Pedro or Gardena. Some families such as James J. Nakanishi, an aerospace engineer for Douglas Aircraft, were able to buy homes in East Long Beach and was featured in the *Independent Press-Telegram* in 1956.²⁰ Other influential Japanese American women in Long Beach are Carolyn Yano and Mary Arimoto. Yano helped found the Asian Pacific Outreach program that originally aimed to help Asian immigrant wives of the military familiarize themselves with Western culture and later sought grants that supported refugees. Arimoto served in the Grace Presbyterian Church, which was a Japanese American Church in Long Beach that provided English as a second language courses to break down the language barrier that may bar Asian communities from receiving the help they need. Arimoto was the project director for the Reaching Out Service to Asian Women at the Westside Neighborhood Center in 1973, and by

¹⁷ Ibid., 109.

¹⁸ Ibid., 118.

¹⁹ Ibid., 109.

²⁰ Ibid., 112.

1976 was the director of counseling and supportive services at the Asian Pacific Outreach where she served Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong refugee communities. She also personally met Nhia Lee and his family at the airport who were one of the first five Hmong families to arrive. The support system that she and Yano created served various Asian communities and met the needs of the changing demographics of Asian immigrants and refugees that settled in the Long Beach area at the time of need, highlighting the importance of multiethnic-serving organizations. Arimoto's service had set the foundation for Nhia to then sponsor over 200 Hmong refugees to immigrate.

The Japanese population in Long Beach was considered the majority Asian group in the 1960's according to the *Press-Telegram*, but noted that the population was aging and decreased in the years following the war. Some like Charles Yata, a retired civil engineer, are highlighted in a newspaper article dancing in an undergraduate aerobics class at California State University, Long Beach.²¹ He is among many elderly who are interviewed about their retirement plans and his philosophy of staying active. The newspaper also highlighted an older Japanese American named Ikeguchi, a 67 year old man who returned to Long Beach in 1947 and became the unofficial mayor of the Japanese community. He founded the Japanese community center, an organizer of the sister program with Yokkaichi, Japan, and a member of the Westside Redevelopment Task Force. Ikeguchi helped form a Junior Optimists club (organization that encourages community service) at Westside Junior High School, and noted the change of Asian demographics in relation to the Japanese population: "I noticed in that group that there were Samonans, Thailand and Filipino people. People from all over. Recent immigrants, Southeast

²¹ "Three Who Spurn Retirement Blues", *Independent Press-Telegram*, sec. Charles Yata, Historical Society of Long Beach Collecitons 2007.013.391.

Asians”.²² He counted two Japanese Americans students in the club and claimed, “That’s it now. We used to have quite a few. Now there’s just one or two... All that’s left around here is old fogies like me and first-generation Japanese people”.²³ Ikeguchi and his family moved away from the Westside like Harry Manaka, an owner of Azuma Gift Shop on Santa Fe Avenue before moving to North Long Beach who expressed concerns of crime and changing ethnic groups. Both expressed that following generations continued to assimilate into US culture and mainstream American life, and expressed that many Japanese Americans were unable to speak and understand Japanese, losing a cultural ties to their language.

The Japanese population was hinting at the vast demographic changes seen within the Asian communities of Long Beach. The early to mid-1970’s saw influxes of Southeast Asian immigrants as a result of the Vietnam War. Laotians, Vietnamese, Hmong, and Cambodian immigrants increased the Long Beach Asian population by the thousands.²⁴ Laotian Hmongs are an indigenous ethnic group who were secretly recruited by the CIA to prevent the spread of communism in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War. The mid to late 1970’s were characterized by political refugees, but the majority of the Hmong population consisted of rural farmers who were recruited as soldiers to fight against the North Vietnamese. Their lives had been characterized by war and instability – from fleeing the Mekong River to Thailand at the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 to their continued struggle in the United States that were exacerbated by their socio-economic situation in Long Beach. “The Changing Face of Long Beach ” article highlights a Hmong refugee’s adjustment in Long Beach that describes these

²² Doreen Carvajal, “Sun is Setting on the Japanese community”, *Independent Press-Telegram*, sec. The Changing Face of Long Beach.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Doreen Carvajal, “Phnom Phen by the Sea”, *Independent Press-Telegram*, sec. The Changing Face of Long Beach, Historical Society of Long Beach Collections 2007.013.397.

challenges. Char Xer Lee was a respected leader of a central Laotian Hmong village called Banxon where he became a CIA soldier in 1962 and came to the US in 1978 to seek asylum. Lee touches upon the immense struggle he's faced trying to learn English - failing after two unsuccessful years of English classes at Long Beach City College.²⁵ His failure stemmed from the Hmong oral culture and the absence of a written language, creating further confusion and struggle as he sought medical help. Lee's doctor prescribed medications to help with his fear and anxiety, but since he couldn't read or write, he combined the medications and caused him to faint.²⁶ He stressed about his inability to work, which once again stemmed from the immense language barrier between Hmong and English that contributed to their financial crisis. Furthermore, housing availability and affordability was scarce because of prior discriminatory policies, forcing many to reside in the Westside and Central Area among the other racial minorities that historically occupied these areas. This competition of resources coupled with information from Vang Pao - a former general in the Royal Laotian Army - led Hmong refugees to make their way to Fresno and the Central Valley, marking Long Beach as a transitional place for the Hmong diaspora. Pao is the leader of 12 Hmong clans in the US and resides in Montana, but drew many to the farming communities up north, including the three past presidents of the Hmong Association. The Hmong Association of Long Beach was founded in 1981 by Yang Cha and is a non-profit mutual assistance refugee support organization after being part of Southeast Asian Outreach.²⁷ The organization had even published "Hmong Folk Stories", now housed in

²⁵ Doreen Carvajal, "Adjustment hard for Hmong family", *Independent Press-Telegram*, December 31, 1982, sec. The Changing Face of Long Beach, Historical Society of Long Beach Collection 2007.013.329.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Hmong Association of Long Beach, Inc., "History of the HAOLB", <https://www.hmongassociationoflongbeach.org/haolb-history.html#:~:text=The%20Hmong%20Association%20of%20Long,by%20those%20that%20followed%20him.>

the Historical Society of Long Beach, that highlight Hmong oral culture and consist of many oral histories and folk tales that Hmong Americans remember their family members reciting to them as children.

Although some Cambodians are photographed studying abroad at CSULB in the early 1960's, Cambodian immigration became prevalent in two waves. The first saw thousands immigrating in 1975, and mainly consisted of those who were evacuated as the Khmer Rouge - a communist party led by Pol Pot with the goal to stop the country from advancing and return to agrarian society - took control of the country. A majority of the Cambodians immigrating in the mid-70's came from refugee camps in Thailand and willingly created as much support as possible for those in the 1980's. One of these key individuals was David Viradet Kreng, a student from the 1950's who settled in Southern California in 1968. He helped organize assistance for the Cambodian evacuees arriving in Camp Pendleton in 1975, and was pictured by *Bechtel News Southern California* in June 1975 next to a poster asking for donations of clothing and other personal items for evacuees.²⁸ Alongside individuals like Kreng, other groups such as the Khmer Solidarity Association of America composed of Cambodian professionals sent letters to President Gerald Ford and appealed to the American Red Cross. The Khmer Solidarity Association later became the Cambodian Association of America (CAA). As the situation in Cambodia escalated, delegates and representatives of Cambodian groups from across the nation united under a national organization – CAA on December 29, 1975. The conference, first held in Long Beach in 1976 aimed at mobilizing resources, came together to ensure the refugees received the needed support and understanding from fellow Cambodians in their new country. Sem Yang was the first president of the CAA and represented the needs of Cambodian refugees

²⁸ Susan Needham and Karen Quintiliani, *Cambodians in Long Beach*, (Arcadia Publishing Library Editions, 2008).

locally and nationally. All of these organizations were essential for the Cambodian community as advocates of their needs and helped finance mental health resources, housing resources, etc.

The large numbers of refugees of the 1980's followed the invasion of Cambodia by the Vietnamese. Refugees coming in the 1980's were severely affected by war atrocities, where many suffered physical and psychological trauma at the hands of the Khmer Rouge and all persons fleeing had experienced the loss of at least one family member by starvation, disease, or murder. The *Press-Telegram* conducted a study indicating that almost every Cambodian resident of Long Beach experienced a complete loss of personal property and serious lack of food, and adults over 50 experienced high levels of anxiety or depression. Danielle Khim's oral history reflects these extensive losses, where she describes how her father was separated from her at the age of six along with her family at an encampment after being forced to leave their home in Phnom Penh. She explained tearfully that her 3-year old brother Apee died of malnutrition in the camp three months into their stay, and how she was constantly separated from her mother until they both escaped by walking to Thailand across a minefield. After arriving, they stayed underneath a temple in Thailand before immigrating to the US. Khim and her mother were able to be sponsored by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in 1979, and considered herself lucky since they had no other relatives or family to sponsor them in. Her mother then sponsored her step-father and step-siblings from Thailand, and they all resided in San Diego with a one bedroom house. As she got older, Khim went to free past life regression hypnosis with a friend that provided clarity of her purpose in life, which she claimed was to serve her community. This inspired her to become a professional certified hypnotherapist to help people overcome trauma, and in that way found the Cambodian community in Long Beach. She claimed that she searched for information on Google and found information about volunteering for the first Cambodian

music festival that connected her with other important Cambodian community leaders like Prach, a Cambodian Town Film Festival director. Her connections led her to consistently volunteer for the Cambodian community, even if that meant driving 50 miles up from San Diego on a daily basis. Her volunteer work helped her get in touch with her roots, and illustrates the importance of community organizations as an opportunity to support and heal those within the community.

These extreme losses left painful memories that are exacerbated by their conditions in West and Central Long Beach. An Eng recounts his pain through a translator of the *Press-Telegram* of his extreme headaches that occurred weeks after torture in a Khmer Rouge prison, and is one of many factors that barred his ability to flourish in the US.²⁹ An Eng is the only adult in the household who can read or write in his native tongue and was eager to learn English in hopes of retaining a well-paying job to get off welfare, but still no one wanted to hire him and his physical symptoms worsened, sometimes so bad that he cannot even talk. As the main caretaker for his wife and four children, he lacks the access to adequate mental and physical health care among his finances. These problems trickle down to the children, where one of his daughters – Ratana Neth, 14 – is designated with helping her younger siblings and family on top of attending school. Ratana graduated from Jefferson Junior High and is expected to fulfill family obligations as the oldest child - caring for the younger children, shopping for food, cooking, paying bills (as she is more comfortable speaking English than Khmer), washing the laundry in the bathtub and hanging it outside to dry on a makeshift clothesline. Ratana is among many Southeast Asian students that overwhelmed the Long Beach Unified School District in terms of the massive amounts of enrollment. This led the Long Beach City Health Department, LBUSD, Asian-Pacific Family Services, and Long Beach City College to create network of services to help Asian

²⁹ Janet Wiscombe, "Prisoners of their Past", *Independent Press-Telegram*, July 30, 1989, sec. Life/style, Historical Society of Long Beach Collections 2007.013.306.

refugees assimilate. The Assignment Center converted classrooms at Edison Elementary School was staffed with bilingual aides who speak Vietnamese, Chinese, Hmong, Tagalog, Lao, and Cambodian to aid with enrollment information for parents and children alike. Other institutions like Long Beach City College continued to offer English as a Second Language courses, but churches, temples, missionaries, community organizations, and other non-profit organizations offered English lessons through prayer and thousands of volunteers at local Protestant churches. These community spaces thus responded to Cambodian needs and provided a foundation for community organizations in the late 1980s-2000s to continue to respond to community needs and advocate for (more) city, state, and federal funds to run these community-specific programs.

The sudden influx of Asian refugees and increasing Asian communities created pressure and animosity to the historically Black and Latino/a communities in Long Beach. Japanese, Hmong, and Cambodian communities found themselves residing in the Westside and Central Areas as those were the only places many immigrants and refugees could afford or find homes or apartments for rent, competing with the Black community that had historically been shut out from surrounding Long Beach areas by discriminatory property laws and realtors. Some Black families expressed that the area near Poly High School put immense pressure on the limited job market and housing, expressing resentment towards Asian communities. Rumors also began to spread as refugees settled into the Westside, where many believed that refugees were given low-interest loans, generous tax breaks, and \$1,500 government handouts to refugees that sparked fights on the welfare lines according to “The Changing Face of Long Beach” in the *Independent Press-Telegram*. Individuals such as Dee Andrews believed these widespread rumors and expressed in an oral history interview with Amarkvati Murphy: “That was the group that came over with something [referring to first wave of Cambodian immigrants who also received an

education]... bought up all of the African American property and stores that we had on California and Anaheim! All of it was owned by African Americans!... We had all of that! And then the Cambodians came in with a piece of gold...”. Andrews describes how the Cambodian community displaced Black business from West Long Beach, which created more hostility between the communities. Yet refugees received no more than \$300 for clothing, food, and shelter upon arrival and still had to qualify for monthly refugee assistance benefits that were the same as welfare allotments, totaling to more than \$686 for five. Few who pooled money owned doughnut shops, hamburger stands, and grocery markets in the Central Area. Articles uplifting Cambodian businesses for creating a positive impact on the “slum” and dangerous areas perpetuate the idea of Asian American minorities embodying a model historic community of Black and brown in the area should follow, echoing false ideas of the model minority myth and driving up friction between the groups. In addition, rampant violence and gang culture became a social norm for young Southeast Asians as a means to protect oneself from others. Youth gang culture was particularly steeped in an increasing distrust of police for their vehement and rampant misconduct as highlighted in the *Press-Telegram* in 1981, even naming nine police officers who had a reputation for brutality. The language barrier and stark cultural differences created fear of the Black community as described by some Hmong refugees, who claim they are unfamiliar with the volume in which many speak.

Amidst the sudden increases of Asian communities in Long Beach because of Southeast Asian refugees, the first Asian American councilwoman was elected for District 7 - Eunice Sato. Sato was born on June 8, 1921 in Livingston, California with five other siblings. While attending San Jose City College during World War II, Executive Order 9066 forced her to leave studies and fled with her family to Colorado. There she resumed studying at Colorado State Teacher’s

College in Greeley where she earned her degree and teaching credential, and continued to receive her Master of Arts at Columbia University Teacher's College where she wrote an essay about her Nisei background. She moved to Long Beach with her husband and family in 1956 after living and working in Japan as a teacher, and became heavily involved in the community. She served as president of the PTA council, in the Cancer society, president of the Long Beach Area Council of Churches, president of the Japanese-American Republicans, Community Health Services Council, and many other community organizations. Her extensive community involvement led to her running for the 7th district city council seat, which she won in 1975 and served in city council until 1982 upon her selection as mayor. Within her time as councilwoman, Sato was also appointed by city council members as the first female and first Asian American to serve as mayor of a major American city from 1980-1982. Her service both as councilwoman and mayor are major milestones for the Asian American community, as her voice and presence represents a large historic Asian community that faced discriminatory policies, experienced upheaval from their homes during World War II, and paved a way for other Asian communities to fulfill these political leadership roles as the demographics of the Long Beach Asian communities shift.

Her policies and involvement both as councilwoman and mayor reflected personal attributes of her life while also embodying Republican Party values. Many of her policies reflected a "tough on crime", "broken-window" aspect that heavily relied on police force. In November 1981, she wrote in a bulletin that she believed that one of the two worst problems Long Beach faced was crime against person and property, and shared her personal anecdotes of being mugged in Los Angeles and twice in Long Beach. She continued to share that the city council echoed the critical need to address crime and how the Council voted to continue the

Neighborhood Watch program through the Police Department after federal subsidies had run out, and publicly defended police officer actions while the *Press-Telegram* ousted nine members with a record of police brutality. Furthermore, she shared that despite budget cuts, the council set aside funds to employ 51 new patrol officers and 5 new staff positions of the Police Department to work on Neighborhood Watch, insisting on funding police over public opinion. Neighborhood Watch is a community participation program that primarily functions to teach people about burglary and how to secure homes against it, and stresses the importance of reporting to police. However, residents of the Westside and Central Areas - where police presence and the Neighborhood Watch program is the most prevalent - highly distrust the police. This is severely expressed by the Black community and recently immigrated Latino and Asian communities who reside almost exclusively in those areas.

The persistent funds used to finance police presence over social services that could directly aid the health and needs of the immense amount of refugees were also apparent with Sato's concerns of graffiti and responses to youth gang culture to address rampant crime in the Westside and Central Area. Local newspaper articles in the *Independent Press-Telegram* report the fears of elderly communities in district 7 about crime and prevalence of youth gangs,³⁰ which Sato aimed to curb with church-sponsored programs to save city funds and foster community engagement. As a longtime volunteer United Methodist Church Worker, Sato, Reverend Leo Nieto of Atlantic United Methodist Church, community youth workers Olvia Herrera, Tom Leary, Pam Contrades, and John Northmore met to create a city-wide program that provided direction to Long Beach youth to advertise healthier alternatives to gang activity. Aside from funding police, Sato took great pride in the city's redevelopment plans of downtown Long

³⁰ Daryl Kelley, "Elderly's greatest fear is crime", *Independent Press-Telegram*, sec. The Changing Face of Long Beach, Historical Society of Long Beach Collection 2007.013.331.

Beach, emphasizing that the appearance of a city's downtown area reflects the city's health. In 1977, she announced through the *Action* bulletin a proposal to use federal funds for three major neighborhood preservation efforts: graffiti abatement, public safety education, and housing preservation. Part of the rehabilitation program titled "Bulk Sales" described the city's intentions of buying repossessed homes and selling them to the Mead Redevelopment Corporation, a nonprofit housing rehabilitation corporation that rehabilitates and resold homes to moderate income families as a solution to rundown areas of Downtown Long Beach. These redevelopment projects targeted historical Black and brown communities, further displacing many and implying the detrimental effect these communities have on the area.

One controversial act before Sato was appointed mayor was her stance on Proposition 6 or the Briggs Initiative. This was the first attempt to restrict the rights of lesbian and gay Americans by vote and if passed, teachers who were found to have taken part in "public homosexual activity" or "public homosexual conduct" would be fired. Organizations such as Long Beach Lambda Democratic Club were one of many who encouraged her to vote no on the proposition. Though the Proposition failed, Sato walked out at the time of the vote instead of voting against the homophobic proposition, reflecting her stance on homosexuality that is also implied through her religious affiliation with the Methodist Church. Through the 1970's-1990's, the Methodist Church was scrutinized for their denial of recognizing homosexual relationships in the church, including the Methodist Church Sato served and heavily relied on in her policies of youth gang violence and graffiti. She also failed to show support for a two-day gay pride festival in 1985, and was later sued by Long Beach Lesbian and Gay Pride over a vast difference of insurance policy charge from last year (the difference amounting to over \$999,100).

Though her policies and political affiliation resonated firmly with Reagan Republicanism, she continued to show support for the Asian American community. Sato is pictured in attendance at the first national conference of the Cambodian Associations and eventually accepted as a member of the Advisory Board of the Cambodian Association of America (CAA) in 1988, which at the time had two office locations in Long Beach that provided employment services to refugees, business technical assistance to refugee business community and would-be entrepreneurs, offers alcohol prevention, child abuse and neglect prevention, immigration, and youth activities Cambodian radio broadcast, and other supportive services to the community as described in a letter written to Sato by Nil Hul, the executive director of the CAA.

Many other organizations began to respond to the needs of the Cambodian community the years following Sato's end of service on the city council. In 1991, the United Cambodian Community plaza opened, which became a center for tradition and support in a plethora of ways. For instance, the UCC helped kickstart the Southeast Asian Health Project (SEAHP), a joint project between UCC and St. Mary Medical Center that was founded in 1987 as a multilingual, multicultural health and social education project to provide quality outreach and education services to Southeast Asian and Latino communities in Long Beach and Norwalk. The SEAHP developed a two-tier approach to effectively provide support for Cambodian families and children, including a school-based Cambodian after school culture class and home-based parent education that aimed to improve the social health of Cambodian children in school and in public through increased self-esteem and problem solving, as well as bridge the language barriers between generations (parent and child) by providing Cambodian language and culture classes. This project also aimed to educate the youth on the consequences of alcohol, drugs, and gang

violence, which all encompassed a collective effort of community organizing between the UCC and St. Mary Medical Center. To disseminate information, Parent Outreach Program pamphlets were created to advertise these social services. The UCC had also provided posters and pamphlets translated in Khmer about important information, including how to fill out and why the US Census forms are important and informing the community about the causes and preventive measures that can be taken against AIDS and HIV. The Census information is crucial because Los Angeles had severely miscounted the amount of Cambodians, Laotians, and even failed to record the Hmong populations living in Long Beach because the forms were only available in English. Community organizations thus play a central role to inform and mobilize as need be, which the UCC continues to do so today.

Another community organization that remains active today is Khmer Girls in Action (KGA). KGA started as HOPE for Girls, a reproductive health project that launched a campaign to end sexual harassment at school, and at the end of the project turned into KGA in determination to continue to serve the community. KGA focuses on girl's leadership programs and push for Asian American visibility in media through the publication of various films that were screened at Asian American Pacific Islander Film Festival and Los Angeles Film Festival. The organization had helped to mobilize public attention regarding the deportation of Cambodians suspected of gang-related crimes and other youth development programs, including paid part-time positions for high school students. The organization had launched Participatory Action Research that turned into the first published report on the state of Cambodian American Youth in Long Beach, and continued to create empowerment programs, support other wellness campaigns at Roosevelt Elementary (across Poly high School) with teen-only hours, and other

youth programs that inspire Khmer youth to speak at budget hearing to continually advocate for their community needs.

In 1986, Cambodian Americans began to create visibility in local politics. Nil Hul was the first Cambodian American to run for office. In a dinner in honor of his candidacy for the 6th district, speakers from the Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Filipino communities were part of the program to show support of his campaign, illustrating solidarity between various Southeast Asian communities. Despite not being elected, Nil Hul remained active in the Cambodian community as President of the CAA, and showed the possibility for Cambodian representation on the Long Beach electoral ballot that was followed by Sandy Arun Blankenship. Blankenship was the first Cambodian American woman to run for office in 1996. Despite not winning her election either, their goal of leading the way for other Cambodians was met with success with Sikhary Chau of Lowell, Massachusetts, the first Cambodian American to be elected to a local office and the first Cambodian American mayor in the US on January 3, 2022.

Other successes for the Cambodian community in Long Beach that must be recognized is the designated area of Cambodia Town that runs from Anaheim Street between Junipero and Atlantic. Councilwoman Laura Richardson of the 6th district, Councilmembers Bonnie Lowenthal, Suja Lowenthal, Rae Gabelich, and Val Lerch all extended support when the project was proposed to the council. The area designated the largest concentration of Cambodian businesses because of their positive impact on surrounding businesses, and to honor the largest Cambodian population outside of Southeast Asia. Long Beach was viewed by many as the city of familiarity as thousands of families fled the “killing fields” of the Pol Pot regime can be illustrated with the designation of Cambodia Town. On July 3, 2007, the Long Beach City Council recognized the section of Anaheim Street as “Cambodia Town” – the first ethnic

designation in the city's history and the first Cambodia Town in the nation. This physically marks and honors the presence of the Cambodian community, and highlights the various boundaries Cambodian refugees had to overcome in the new city they called their home.

Another huge victory in terms of political presence of Cambodian Americans is Suely Saro's successful campaign and election as Long Beach councilwoman of district 6 in 2020 over a 12-year incumbent councilmember. Saro was born in a refugee camp in Thailand in 1980 before resettling in San Diego in 1982. In an oral history interview with Amarkvati Murphy, she describes how her life was characterized with constant movement both in the refugee camps and around Echo Park, where her family found work in the garment industry. Saro claims that her family didn't move to Long Beach because of the violence that was heard amongst the Cambodian community in Los Angeles, but violence still found its way to her family as her brother took part in youth gang culture. She received her Bachelor's degree in Molecular Cellular Developmental Biology from University of California, Santa Cruz, Master's degree in Public Administration from California State University, Long Beach, and a Doctorate in Education and Organizational Leadership from the University of La Verne. Saro shared that her ability to speak and understand language better than her parents was a huge self-determining factor that aided her journey in politics later in life that inspired her to actively serve her community. Saro's was involved extensively in community service: labor organizing, the executive director of Khmer Girls in Action, Health Access Project at Asian Americans Advancing Justice Los Angeles, the founder and Board Chair of Women for Women Foundation based in Cambodia, Board Chair of the Asian Pacific Islander American Professional Network based in Long Beach. Her presence in local politics provides visibility for Cambodian Americans, especially those who have refugee experiences similar to her story, as an important

voice and representative for other Asian Americans despite taking over forty years since Cambodians have come to Long Beach. She also describes the need for more visibility in leadership of other Asian communities of Los Angeles, Long Beach, and Orange County.

Although Asian representation in local politics of Long Beach seem to accurately represent the demographic of large communities, other Asian communities have yet to see the same. Filipinos have a long history in Long Beach, where articles from the *Independent Press-Telegram* throughout the 1960's have mentioned few thousands residing in the area, and have become more visible in terms of demographics mentioned by newspapers towards the 1980's and 1990's. The Filipino population is recorded to have grown from 1,800 to 7,750, with nearly 3,000 settling in the Westside neighborhoods. Many of the immigrants were relatives of Filipino soldiers who gained citizenship after their time serving in the US Navy, and February 2024 marked the opening of a non-profit organization to serve the community called Filipino Migrant Center on 1631 W Burnett Street. Unlike the designated Cambodia Town, city officials in 1992 issued a proclamation designating Santa Fe Avenue between 20th Street and Spring Street as Filipino Neighborhood, but the Filipino community didn't have the money to mark the site with signs. Other newspaper clippings of the *Independent Press-Telegram* from 1994-1997 have highlighted funding issues for the Filipino Lantern Parade, the Filipino community's single biggest holiday festival in the Long Beach area. Festival organizer, Nick Sramek described that the intention of the parade was to attract the diversity of peoples and cultures on the city's Westside, parading *parols* - five pointed paper and bamboo star-shaped lantern that represent the Star of Bethlehem that are hung in the homes and public spaces around Christmas time in the Philippines. The Westside Community Christmas Festival and Parade (the organizing committee) received a \$5,000 grant from the California Arts Council to build a large *parol*, but

the committee was unable to raise funds for the festival. Cesar Hornilla, the leader of the parade committee, had spent over \$1,000 of his own accord on supplies. Though the festival fortunately took place, it signifies the struggles of community organizing and recognition for Filipinos. Filipino community members mention the importance of the parade, as some like Michelle Ganioco had never been to the Philippines and saw the event as a way to be connected with their culture. This event takes place at the same time as the Hmong New Year Festival, where traditional costumes, dances, and games like “pov vob” were held. Hmong are another group who have yet to have political visibility in Long Beach despite arriving at the same time as the first wave of Cambodian refugees. Although these communities are yet to be politically visible in local government, Saro’s achievement as the first Cambodian American councilwoman of Long Beach gives hope for further change in Asian political leadership.

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