Panel Discussion:
The Struggle to Change "Jap Road"

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I. INTRODUCTION

On February 24, 2005, Texas State Representative Martha Wong† joined forces with the Asian American Bar Association of Houston to sponsor a discussion about the struggle to change the name of three controversial Texas roads—Jap Road in Jefferson County, Jap Road in Fort Bend County, and Jap Lane in Orange County. The event was designed to provide a historical record for this effort, and to explain the causes of its ultimate success. Several dozen members of the Houston legal and Asian communities attended, and in addition, the event was televised on a local cable access channel in Houston.

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† See Texas House of Representatives, Representative Martha Wong, http://www.house.state.tx.us/members/dist134/wong.htm (last visited Apr. 30, 2006). The day before the panel discussion, Representative Wong introduced legislation (Texas House Bill 1536) prohibiting derogatory names or designations for public property. The Texas House Committee on Government Reform heard testimony on the bill from Sandra Tanamachi and George Hirasaki on March 21, 2005.
Jap Road in Jefferson County was originally named over a century ago for the Mayumi family, a Japanese family who had moved to the area and helped introduce the region to rice farming. The effort to change the name of that road began in the early 1990s. But it was not until July 19, 2004, after national and international attention, that members of the Jefferson County Commission voted to change the road name. On August 2, 2004, the road was renamed Boondocks Road, after a local restaurant. Within weeks, officials in Fort Bend County announced that they would follow suit, changing the name of their Jap Road to Moore Street. Officials in Orange County likewise eventually agreed to change the name of Jap Lane.

The Texas Historical Commission has agreed to issue an Official Texas Historical Marker at the site of the former Jap Road in Jefferson County. Meanwhile, another Jap Road has been located in Etheridge, Tennessee.

The term Jap is an offensive racial slur against persons of Japanese descent, with roots in World War II and the internment of Japanese Americans. Indeed, on July 24, 1986, the U.S. House of Representatives


4. See, e.g., Eric Hanson, Second Jap Road May Be Renamed, HOUSTON CHRON., Aug. 4, 2004, at B1; Eric Hanson, Fort Bend County Renames Jap Road, HOUSTON CHRON., Sep. 28, 2004; Eric Hanson, Second Jap Road Quietly Renamed, HOUSTON CHRON., Sep. 29, 2004 at B4.


unanimously adopted a resolution condemning the term as “racially derogatory” and “offensive.”

II. PANEL TRANSCRIPT

A. Introductory Remarks

JAMES HO (moderator): This is the story of three Texas towns, three Texas roads, and one racial slur—an ugly slur against millions of Japanese Americans. The story of these three roads will be told by our panelists here today, and so I will just make a few brief, introductory remarks.

Texans are good people. I’m proud to be a Texan. I am especially proud to have married a Texan. And so I am pleased, but not surprised, that the controversy surrounding these three roads has come to an amicable conclusion.

I have to admit, though, to having some mixed feelings about this whole episode. On the one hand, I’m of course happy that the controversy was resolved and that the road names are no more.

On the other hand, I confess that I’m a bit saddened by the experience. Is this really where we are today at the dawn of the 21st century? We’re all glad, of course, that the problem was resolved, but how could it have existed today in the first place?

8. The resolution reads:
   Whereas the term “Jap” is racially derogatory and is offensive;
   Whereas the Japanese American community is actively seeking to eliminate the use of “Jap.” as an abbreviation for the words “Japan” and “Japanese”;
   Whereas “Jpn.” is an easily recognizable and racially inoffensive abbreviation for the words “Japan” and “Japanese” and can be written “Jpn.” or pronounced J-P-N; and
   Whereas congressional recognition of “Jpn.” as the appropriate abbreviation for the words “Japan” and “Japanese” would help to end the use of “Jap.” as an abbreviation: Now, therefore, be it
   Resolved by the House of Representatives (the Senate concurring), That the Congress recognizes “Jpn.” as the appropriate abbreviation for the words “Japan” and “Japanese”.


It's hard to imagine a racial slur being tolerated like this against another community. Is our community really so far behind? Consider the other examples around the nation. Until 2001, there was a mountain in Idaho called Chink's Peak. That name stuck until a Japanese American named Micki Kawakami endured racially-charged hate mail in her effort to at last successfully change the name of that mountain.

In Philadelphia there is still a restaurant to this day called Chink's Steaks. And it's even in our national media. On a recent cable news show, a former undersecretary of the Army referred to dealing with the "Japs" during World War II. No one even bothered to express offense at the use of that term.

And, of course, there's the recent Tsunami Song, which refers to "screaming Chinks," and "little Chinamen being swept away." That song

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10. There are other incidents suggesting that the perception of the Asian community as a forgotten minority persists. *The Washington Post* recently published the results of a new Gallup Poll, noting that “[f]ifteen percent of all workers say they have been discriminated against in their workplace during the past year.” Amy Joyce, *The Bias Breakdown: Asians and Blacks Lead in Perceived Discrimination at Work*, WASH. POST, Dec. 9, 2005, at D1. Notably, the article pointed out that “31 percent of Asians surveyed reported incidents of discrimination, the largest percentage of any racial or ethnic group, with African Americans the second-largest group at 26 percent. But Asians generally file fewer discrimination complaints than other groups, according to the EEOC.” *Id.* The next week, *The Washington Post* published a letter to the editor noting that “It's ironic that 'The Bias Breakdown,' … featured a photo of a black man and a white woman. The article reported that '31 percent of Asians surveyed reported incidents of discrimination, the largest percentage of any racial or ethnic group.' Was it that difficult for your editors to find an Asian model for the photo shoot?” Petrina Chong Hollingsworth, Letter to the Editor, *Asian Omission*, WASH. POST, Dec. 17, 2005, at A21. See also Erin Texeira, *Asian Youths Suffer Harassment in Schools*, ABC NEWS, Apr. 9, 1998, at B9.


14. *See* Interview by Bill O'Reilly with Joseph Reeder, *The O'Reilly Factor*, (Fox News Network broadcast Aug. 23, 2004). During the interview, Reeder, former undersecretary of the army under President Clinton told O'Reilly that “in World War II, we told [soldiers that they were] in for the duration until you kill the Germans or the Japs and come back.”
was broadcast on a New York City radio show, and during the broadcast one of the hosts was reportedly even heard saying, "I’m going to start shooting Asians."15

These incidents will continue to occur until good people of every community stand up and express their outrage. And so we are here today, so fortunate to have four good people here with us to talk about their courage and their struggle to get rid of three Jap Roads here in Texas. Their stories are inspiring, and only through their leadership, through leaders like them, will we have any hope of realizing the world in which we all want to live.

We have a videotape that the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) has presented, and then after the videotape, we’ll hear from our panelists.

B. Videotape Transcript

**THOMAS KUWAHARA:** When I was driving half way to the Winnie exit, I saw, you know, what I thought was J-A-P, and I said, “Wait, wait a minute. Did I see things?”

**NARRATOR:** Thomas Kuwahara wasn’t seeing things. While heading west through Texas, he spotted a street sign for Jap Road. The sign haunted Kuwahara, who was of Japanese descent and who was all too familiar with the racist use of the word Jap.

**THOMAS KUWAHARA:** I kept thinking, you know, it’s fifty-five years after World War II. How can an old sign like that still be in existence, you know? And I thought to myself, you know, what can I do?

**NARRATOR:** Because of what Kuwahara, Sandra Tanamachi and attorney Scott Newar did, and because of the efforts coordinated by the Anti-Defamation League and joined by other civil rights organizations, Jap Road’s name was changed, but not before it gained notoriety around the world and taught a lesson about how names can hurt.

The effort to change the name of Jap Road started in 1993 when a school teacher from Beaumont, then named Sandra Tanamachi Nakata, decided to act.

**SANDRA TANAMACHI:** I knew that the word Jap was a racial slur, and it was offensive and brought pain and anguish to Japanese Americans, and I knew that wasn’t right, so I wanted to change it in honor of them, in honor of my grandparents, in honor of all the Japanese American soldiers and my mother who had to go to internment camp, for all of those people, I thought I would change it for them.

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15. The song was first broadcast on January 21, 2005, and a replay was recorded at http://www.koreanzx.net/mailier/misc/hot97_tsunami.mp3. The two DJs who recorded the skit, Miss Jones and Todd Lynn, aired “The Tsunami Song” on New York hip hop station Hot 97 (WQHT) during the morning show, “Miss Jones in the Morning.” For the lyrics of the song, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USA_for_Indonesia. See also Wave of Controversy Continues: Fired Tsunami Song Parody Producer Hired at San Francisco Station, IMAGE, Sept.-Oct. 2005, at 56.
NARRATOR: Sandra Tanamachi wrote letters and mounted a grassroots effort. She sought the help of others, including Beaumont veteran Marion Ferguson, who couldn’t ignore the slur, because he knew it was wrong. He saw Japanese Americans save the lives of other U.S. soldiers in World War II.

MARION FERGUSON: They fought for about three weeks in the worst of conditions, and when they finally rescued the remaining soldiers, there were only 211 left.

NARRATOR: Tanamachi also sought the help of the Anti-Defamation League. The ADL’s mission is to stop the defamation of the Jewish people and to secure justice and fair treatment to all. ADL could not ignore the pain Japanese American citizens felt when they saw Jap Road.

In 1993, the ADL’s southwest regional director called attorney Scott Newar for help. Newar, the ADL and Nakata went before Jefferson County commissioners to ask for a name change, but to no avail. According to Beaumont oral historians, the road was named after Yasuo Mayumi, a Japanese rice farmer who settled in the area shortly after the turn of the century.

Area residents didn’t understand that the word was a slur and fought the name change, saying the name honored Mayumi, but the word Jap was not an honor after World War II, when Japan became the enemy.

The ADL understood that, and so did the leaders of other civil rights groups who participated in an ADL-coordinated effort to get the road’s name changed once and for all.

ROBERTO FLORES: We knew exactly what it was to be on the receiving end of remarks that were very hurtful, so when we heard about this about 10 years ago, we’ve been working with this, because we know what it is to hear something like that, and we thought if it hurts me, it certainly hurts someone else to be referred to some derogatory remark like that.

NARRATOR: In 2003 Tanamachi, Kuwahara and Newar joined the ADL and other civil rights groups, including the NAACP, LULAC, Japanese American Citizens League and the Organization of Chinese Americans in a renewed campaign to obtain a different name for Jap Road.

This effort included a legal strategy mounted by Newar and a news conference with all the civil rights organizations involved. County commissioners started receiving letters and e-mails that were impossible to ignore.

Jefferson County Judge Carl Griffith Jr. wanted the name changed all along. He didn’t want Jefferson County to be considered racist, and, more importantly, he felt the name’s sting.

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16. President of League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), Council #4410.
JUDGE CARL GRIFFITH: Caring about the 442nd Battalion that saved the lost battalion, talking to or receiving letters from other Japanese Americans around the country, knowing that clearly it hurt them and it hurt them because of the internment camps that we had in this country, it hurt too many people not to change it.

NARRATOR: On July 19, 2004, Jefferson County commissioners voted to change the road’s name and let residents of the road pick a new one. The residents chose the name of a popular restaurant that had been a landmark in the area, and on August 2, 2004, commissioners agreed to rename Jap Road, Boondocks Road.

Two of the leaders of the residents group, Wayne and Polly Wright, had worked with Griffith, the ADL and the County to create an historical marker honoring Yasuo Mayumi.

POLLY WRIGHT: We’d like to convey to the community that he was a very happy man in our area, very well received and loved and thought a whole lot of.

NARRATOR: The efforts of the ADL, individuals and the County commissioners made many people happy, including Linda Mayumi Klicker, the granddaughter of the man after whom the road originally was named.

LINDA MAYUMI KLICKER: It’s not about, you know, people who have been marginalized and who have had these comments said to them or who have felt hurt from racist remarks, but I think it just has to do with being a human being and knowing that if something causes so much pain for somebody, and we can all empathize with that.

NARRATOR: And it marked the end of a decade-long struggle for justice for Japanese Americans and all the citizens of Jefferson County, a struggle many believe might have continued without the help of the ADL.

SANDRA TANAMACHI: The second time around, they’re the ones that guided us. They guided us, they talked to the commissioners, they helped set up the meetings. So they were a major factor, and I’m very, very grateful to ADL for all of the help.

SCOTT NEWAR: ADL was indispensable to the success of this effort to change Jap Road.

NARRATOR: For ten decades ADL has worked locally and globally to fulfill its two-part mission—to stop the defamation of the Jewish people, and to secure justice and fair treatment to all. ADL responded to the murder of James Byrd Jr. in Jasper, Texas. ADL responded to a cross burning on a lawn of an African American family’s home near Katy, Texas. ADL helped Muslims who were targeted by hate after terrorist attacks of September 11. And ADL helped change the name of Jap Road, because it is the ADL’s mission to fight hatred and bigotry no matter where it occurs, no matter who it touches.
C. The Struggle Against Jap Road in Jefferson County

SANDRA TANAMACHI: My name is Sandra Tanamachi. I am the Texas school teacher who began the campaign to change the name of Jap Road in Jefferson County. With the aid of my cousin, Oakland attorney Shirley Nakao, I began to seek support in this endeavor. I began by writing letters to U.S. Congressmen Robert Matsui and Norman Mineta, and I contacted Dr. Clifford Ureta, president of the National Japanese American Historical Society.

I also received letters of support from then-President William Jefferson Clinton and Acting Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights James P. Turner. The commissioners, after hearing our testimony, voted four to one against the road change.

The one dissenting vote at that time was cast by Edward Moore, who was the first African American commissioner elected to Jefferson County.

Despite the setback, I remained undeterred with this campaign, and I continued working with Betty Waki, president of the Houston chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League, until 1996, when she stepped down as president.

Then in 1999, I contacted Texas state representative Jim Solis from Cameron County—where I was born and raised. He tried to help us pass a bill, but all efforts were unfortunately to no avail.

On December 2, 2003, on behalf of Thomas Kuwahara and myself, Scott Newar filed a civil rights complaint against Jefferson County, with the United States Department of Transportation and the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, seeking to compel Jefferson County to rename the road.

Then, with the aid of Jodi Bernstein and ADL, we were able to set up meetings. She talked to Judge Carl Griffith, the county commissioner, to set up meetings with the residents of Fannett, and then also to set up a second county commissioner court hearing for July 19, 2004.

There were numerous people who came to testify for both sides. Unexpectedly, a Beaumont resident, an African American named Loretta Guillory, came up and decried the attempt by the Fannett residents to justify their use of Jap Road to honor the early Japanese farmer. She concluded her testimony by saying, “Don’t tell me it’s rain when you’re pissing on me.” That’s what she said, as it came straight from her heart.

After nearly four hours of testimony from both sides, the commissioners voted unanimously to change Jap Road. Judge Griffith gave the residents two weeks to come up with a new name. They came up with the name Boondocks Road. This was voted on August 2, 2004, and that is when Jap Road was renamed.
D. Legal Efforts to Change the Name of Jap Road

SCOTT NEWAR: It's a wonderful opportunity to talk about a success, which those of you who are involved in civil rights issues in Houston and elsewhere in the country know doesn't come very often anymore. We're not living, unfortunately, in the days of the '60s and '70s when civil rights victories seemed to come one right after another, but this was a very important civil rights victory not just locally but nationally and internationally. I believe, although I'm not connected like Sandra and George and others are, to the Asian American community in the country, that this event galvanized the Asian American community in ways that many other events have not.

We had support from all over the world. The video referenced letters coming in. There was TV coverage and media coverage from Japan. There were reporters that were covering the story at the time it happened. And that was a major key in our being able to bring down Jap Road.

Let me talk about the legal approach, since I know there are lawyers in the audience and perhaps some law students, to give you a flavor of how the law was used here.

Back in 1993, when Sandra first began her campaign, it was pretty much a grassroots effort without a real legal angle. ADL was involved back then, and I happened to have had a long-standing relationship with ADL and simply went before the county commissioners, because I was working in Beaumont. I testified at that hearing, but there wasn't a legal threat at the time.

And when the issue resurfaced ten years later or eight years later, I guess, it became clear that we needed a legal angle, we needed a lever to try to force the county to sit up straight and take this issue seriously.

And Thomas Kuwahara, who unfortunately is not here tonight, had come forth at that time and said I don't care what it takes, I want to challenge this road in court, and Thomas really pushed to see this legal challenge come about.

And so I began looking at the legal angles and determined that there was not a very strong basis for a legal claim for two reasons. One, we had an issue of standing, which, as the lawyers in the room know, means that we had a problem with having a client, a plaintiff, who could go in the court and say I have been injured in a way that the Court would take seriously.

Now, Thomas had driven the road, and Sandra had driven on the road, and we would have argued that simply by virtue of having seen this sign, that that would have caused someone of an Asian American background to have suffered injury, but we felt that given the standing, the jurisprudence that exists on the standing issue in the federal courts, that the courts might have turned us away.
Sandra had previously lived in Beaumont, which would have given her a stronger basis for standing, but she no longer lived in Beaumont at the time, and Thomas was a resident of Lafayette. So we felt like there was a standing problem.

We were still willing to go forward even with that standing problem, but there was a second hurdle on the legal end, which was a viable claim. Now, for all non-lawyers in the room, it seems self-evident that the fact that someone of Asian American descent or background would be forced to drive the roads of this country and face that sort of racially stigmatic term would give rise to a claim under the Constitution.

The Constitution says we are all entitled to the equal protection of the laws. And had we challenged it in court, we would have used the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution, the Equal Protection Clause, to say that this was denying Asian Americans, especially people of Japanese ancestry, Japanese descent, the equal protection of the laws, that this was a government-sponsored street sign, so we had government action. We had the county stating, essentially, that people who were of Japanese descent are of less standing, in a sense, than others.

There were cases in which the courts had rejected challenges to the Confederate flag, for example, in Mississippi and Alabama, Circuit Court of Appeals cases. We would have argued that Jap was different—that this was not just an issue of the Civil War, that this was a live controversy, that it wasn’t a flag that could be construed as being—the Confederate flag, well, one could say well, maybe it’s not offensive or racially stigmatic, although I think we all believe it is, but this was a defined slur, a recognized slur against the Japanese people.

So we felt that we had some standing issues, and we had real claim issues. The other legal claim we were looking at was the right to interstate

17. See, e.g., Briggs v. Mississippi, 331 F.3d 499 (5th Cir. 2003) (rejecting Establishment Clause challenge against the Mississippi state flag, which incorporates the Confederate battle flag as well as a purported religious symbol, the "St. Andrews Cross" or "Southern Cross"); Coleman v. Miller, 117 F.3d 527 (11th Cir. 1997) (rejecting equal protection challenge to the Georgia state flag, which contains a symbol used in a Confederate battle flag); NAACP v. Hunt, 891 F.2d 1555 (11th Cir. 1990) (rejecting equal protection challenge to the flying of the Confederate flag above the Alabama state capitol dome); Miss. Div. of United Sons v. Mississippi NAACP, 774 So. 2d 388, 390 (Miss. 2000) (rejecting equal protection challenge to the Mississippi state flag, which contains the Confederate battle flag). But see Augustus v. Sch. Bd. of Escambia County, 361 F. Supp. 383 (N.D. Fla. 1973) (court may include, under appropriate circumstances as part of a legitimate desegregation order, a ban on school display of the word "Rebels" and of the Confederate battle flag, as well as a ban on wearing or displaying of Confederate battle flag by individual students while attending school or at school activities), modified on appeal, 507 F.2d 152 (5th Cir. 1975); Smith v. St. Tammany Parish Sch. Bd., 316 F. Supp. 1174, 1176 (E.D. La. 1970), aff'd, 448 F.2d 414 (5th Cir. 1971) (court may include, as part of a legitimate desegregation order, a ban on school display of Confederate flags, on the ground that "[t]he retention of Confederate flags in a unitary school system is no way to eliminate racial discrimination 'root and branch' from the system").
travel, that people of Japanese American descent would not want to travel this road because of the stigma and fear that it would incite.

So what we did was look for a more stable ground on which to lodge the legal complaint. What we wanted, we wanted a legal lever just to force the county to look at this seriously.

So we said okay, there are federal protections that exist within the federal statutes that proscribe discrimination against people on the basis of race and against them on the basis of ethnicity, essentially, and so we said, let’s take a look at these federal statutes, primarily the Fair Housing Act, as well as Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, which prohibits federal funding for activities that are discriminatory on the basis of race and other criteria.

So we looked at these, and we said let’s go forward with a complaint to the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and a complaint to the Department of Transportation (DOT) in which we say to them you cannot fund Jefferson County so long as it uses your federal money to finance or maintain discrimination.

And so we had drafted a demand letter, essentially, to HUD and to DOT, and said as much, and we sent a copy of that letter to the county.

And what we said in the letter was not only is it a violation, we want you to consider cutting off the funding. That is the beauty of Title VI, because it forces counties and states and any other governmental entities that receive federal funding to say wait a second, that’s our lifeblood. If we don’t get the money, we don’t operate. So we wanted to shut them down or at least scare them.

Frankly, HUD did nothing. The Department of Transportation did nothing. And I will say to you that we had within DOT a supporter. Former representative Norman Mineta was the head of DOT at the time. And so he was sympathetic. And we had contacts into his office through some of the civil rights organizations, through some of the people that Sandra mentioned, direct contacts to Norman Mineta.

But they looked at this issue and their legal staff, and they delayed making any decisions—making the decision they ultimately made, which was to say we’re not going to get involved. But they kept it alive long enough that the County had to respond, the County had to take it seriously.

And so what I think ultimately brought down Jap Road was not so much the legal threat here. We didn’t win in the courts. We didn’t take it to court. We didn’t win in front of the federal administrative agencies. We won in the court of public opinion, and that was the result of this grassroots momentum that Sandra and Thomas and the ADL and others really

generated, because at the end of the day Jefferson County did not want to be known for being racially insensitive to a major constituency—actually, it's a minor constituency within Jefferson County, but across the country.

We had Carl Griffith you saw there who is a modern leader. Judge Griffith realized this was not good for the county, and that something had to change. Other county judges in other Texas towns would have said go away.

So I think it was the grassroots effort that really brought this about, and I think that without it, the law would have been a weak tool in this case. I wish I could take responsibility for it, but I think that the lawyers here were not the principal players. This was really the effort of the people on the ground who made this happen.

And I’ll turn it now to Jodi, who, in my view, really drove and kept everyone together.

E. Coalition Efforts to Change the Name of Jap Road

JODI BERNSTEIN: It’s my honor to be here today, and I have to tell you this experience for me has been a personal journey and also a professional journey. I’ve been with the Anti-Defamation League now for almost twenty years, and it’s an organization I value very much.

It started out as an organization that fights for the rights and the safety of the Jewish people, but we realized early on that you really can’t fight for the rights of one minority without fighting for the rights of all people. And so our mandate is so much broader than stopping the defamation of the Jewish people—it’s to secure justice and fair treatment for all citizens alike.

It’s because of that, that I value the ADL as an organization. And all of our work is truly geared towards the protection of democracy, the protection of freedoms, the protection of all people.

So when this came up ten years ago, Sandra had asked us for assistance, and the way we operate is through a board and executive committee. We just don’t arbitrarily decide as staff that we’re going to do something. Our executive committee at that time unanimously said, of course, do it. The word Jap is defamatory, and we realized that, since World War II, any meaning of the word before that had since for sure changed and is now derogatory.

And I really credit with this particular success Thomas, for restarting the effort, and Sandra, of course, for starting it and continuing it in whatever way she could. If you don’t think that individuals can make a difference, I’m here to tell you that Sandra and Thomas did make a difference.

I don’t believe that they were racist. I don’t believe they meant any harm. Some people may disagree with me, but I had the opportunity to spend many hours with these people. I believe they felt this was their town,
this was their road, they’ll do whatever they want with it when they want, and they didn’t want outsiders like ADL and outside individuals—Sandra no longer lived there and others—to come in and tell them what to do.

In the end, I believe that there is a love that they have for the family, the Mayumi family, the brothers who settled that area, but I just don’t believe that they wanted somebody else telling them what to do.

I don’t believe they had any empathy for what it means to be on the other side of that word Jap. And in the end, even despite almost a hundred percent opposition from the residents, the county commissioners did vote to rename the road Boondocks Road. And I’ll tell you that when we heard the name Boondocks, I think all of us gasped, what are you talking about? What are you doing? This is not happening.

But in reflection, Boondocks, to them, is the name of a restaurant that was very, very popular in that area. They explained that it was the name of a restaurant that everybody knew about, and they felt like a number of the residents couldn’t pronounce Mayumi, which is what we really wanted them to name the road. They felt like, you know, most people would understand over there where Boondocks Restaurant used to be.

In the end, I think the victory is there. It is no longer Jap Road. There is no longer a racial slur there. The residents, I think, are happy with their name change. Even if we’re not, they are.

And I think County Judge Carl Griffith really handled the whole situation with deep thought and strategy. I mean, he had to balance both the residents, the community, the civil rights organizations and the amount of media pressure that they were receiving.

I’m not sure if everybody here knows it, but we were even invited to be on Good Morning America. It was going to be Sandra and perhaps a representative from ADL. Good Morning America, they were coming down on a Sunday. They had their truck ready to go down there, and we were going to be interviewed because of this. And there was so much media pressure, and they just couldn’t ignore it.

But in the end I think what County Judge Carl Griffith did is he found a way to please everyone, maybe not make everyone truly happy, but at least please everybody, and he allowed the residents to pick the road. The road was no longer Jap Road.

And then he appointed a small group of us to come up with an historical marker to truly pay homage to the Mayumi brothers, who settled the area. And I am, fortunately, on that committee. It’s been an interesting process.

Wayne Wright and Polly Wright—they are the residents on Boondocks Road/Jap Road who really led the opposition. They’re sitting with me on this committee to come up with this historical marker, Judge Griffith is a part of the committee, and also Linda Mayumi Klicker who you saw on the video.
And this is one of those small world stories that touches your heart on a case like this. Linda had no idea this was going on. She’s a reporter, I believe, for one of the largest Japanese dailies.

She’s based out of Los Angeles, and she was doing research on some issue, and she happened upon a controversy about Jap Road, and she started reading it, and, of course, it mentioned the Mayumi family, the Mayumi legacy and so on. It turns out it was her great-great-great-grandfather, right?

And so she called her parents back in Japan and said, do you know about this? And then that’s how Linda came to us in—pretty much well into the process, but then she came down here, and now she’s working with us on creating an historical marker.

I’m happy to say that we finally came up with language that would be acceptable to the residents on the road, Sandra and the folks that we’ve been working with. The challenge was: were we going to refer to Jap Road in the historical marker? Were we going to say Boondocks Road, formerly known as Jap Road? That’s what the residents wanted. They wanted Jap Road back in there.

In the end, it’s not in there at all, and we’re very, very pleased about that, but it took a lot of wheeling and dealing to get that out of there, as well.

We submitted it to the Jefferson Historical Commission. They’ve accepted it and just today mailed off the application to the Texas Historical Commission, and hopefully within the next several months they’ll accept it, and finally there will be an historical marker on Boondocks Road paying tribute to the two Mayumi brothers who helped to settle the area.

It’s been an amazing experience. For me, the personal journey is, I have met people from all over the world who I now consider friends. I don’t know Linda’s parents from Japan, but I’m in constant contact with them now, and they’ve been really inspirational. They say we did the right thing. This was their family, this was their name, and they said we did the right thing. And Linda also said her great-great-grandfather would be very proud.

So in the end, the years’ worth of efforts paid off, and it’s an honor to be able to be here today to explain to you a little bit more about it.

F. The Struggle Against Jap Lane in Orange County

GEORGE HIRASAKI: I thought we should first talk about Jap Road, because Jap Road is in Jefferson County. There’s a Jap Lane that’s in Orange County just across the Neches River, and it’s a different road. People seem to confuse them whenever we talk about them at the same time.

I’d like to say a little bit about Jap Lane in Orange County. This is a road that my grandfather settled back in 1907. The house burned down in
1923, so we moved to another location about a mile away, and the family always referred to it as the Old Farm Road. It wasn’t until in the 1960s, after I had already moved to Houston, they put up a road sign that said Jap Lane. I was just infuriated, but I no longer lived there. It was hard for me to do anything about it.

Fast forward to a year ago. After the complaint was filed against Jap Road and it got a lot of notoriety, I tried to do something quietly about Jap Lane, hopefully so that we could get the local residents to quietly do something and change the name and honor the founding settler, instead of trying to fight it like how Jefferson County was doing.

I talked with the Orange County Historical Society, which had written stories about the family—family’s stories and the settlement—to see if they would recommend to the county commissioners naming it Kishi Lane after the original settler. And the historical society did agree that they would do this. They sent a letter to the commissioner’s court and made their recommendation.

The commissioner of that precinct then polled the residents of the road, and the response that he got was that 70 percent opposed changing the name of the road. They wanted to keep Jap Lane.

We had to put that on the back burner for a while. Jap Road in Jefferson County got the headlines. And so in the meanwhile, we knew that if the Jap Road effort was to fail, then it would also fail in Orange County. On the other hand, if we were successful in Jefferson County, we should also be successful in Orange County without going through all the pain and agony.

The Japanese American Citizen League got actively involved in it, not just our local chapter but also the JACL national organization. The national organization started a petition, an e-mail petition, that I think we had something like over 4000 signatures in a very short time, and there was also a local petition that was put together.

In the meanwhile, Jefferson County Commissioner’s Court decided to change Jap Road, and so the JACL national organization suddenly had to change the resolution. We reworded the resolution, and the national organization did pass the resolution, first commending the Jefferson County for changing the name, and then recommending Orange County to name Jap Lane after the founding family instead of using a derogatory name.

After all of this had happened, I talked with the county commissioner of that precinct and also to one of the other commissioners if we could do something to change the name and without going through all of the pain and notoriety that Jefferson County had to go through.

We met with one of our family friends that lives on the road, and my brother lives on the road currently. The county commissioner said that yes,
that we don’t want to go through this and go through the expense of a lawsuit or get all of the bad press that Jefferson County had received.

He said that yes, we must change the name of the road. He said that he’ll call a meeting of the residents and discuss this issue and let them know we must change.

They had their first meeting in the end of November. Because of illness, he wasn’t able to attend, but he did correspond with all of them that the name of the road must change, and then he’ll let the residents decide what the name should be.

He was going to call another meeting to decide on the name of the road, and he called the meeting in January. At that time, he was able to attend the meeting, and he got lots of heat for recommending that the name be changed. There was a lot of opposition against it, and no one—or hardly anybody—wanted to name it after Kishi, the name of the founding settler.

And since there was so much dissension, the commissioner said that maybe what we could do is even if they can’t agree on a name, maybe we could divide it into three different sections, and then each section decide on the name, but it’s going to have to be something other than Jap Lane.

They’ve had two meetings, and they’re going to have another meeting where they can decide on what they want to name the road, even if it’s going to be different names in different sections. We’re thankful for having a commissioner that took the courage and took the heat in order to do the right thing.

G. Question and Answer Session

**QUESTION:** Can any of you tell us about the experience in Fort Bend? I hear that was an entirely different experience.

**SANDRA TANAMACHI:** When we found out that there was a third Jap Road in Fort Bend County, I wrote a letter to the county judge and the county commissioners. After they received the letter, they said that they would agree to change their road, because they didn’t want all of the negative publicity that Jefferson County had encountered.

Jefferson County had changed the name of their road maybe just two weeks before we found out about their road. Fort Bend County Commissioners voted on the change on September 28, 2004, and they renamed it Moore Ranch Road, because there was a Moore family that owned the land there. That road was changed without any problems whatsoever.

**QUESTION:** I lived a mile from Jap Road. The opposition wasn’t racist. Families have been there a long time—they just didn’t want to change.

**JODI BERNSTEIN:** The residents were very clear that their desire to keep Jap Road, Jap Lane, had nothing to do with any ill will towards the
Japanese community. They live there. They had been there for years and years.

It was a name that was representative of a Japanese family that settled the area. They didn’t empathize with what the word now means, because to them, it’s how it’s always been.

I didn’t encounter—I mean, Wayne and Polly Wright, Jack Edgar, others who were a part of the opposition team, I didn’t encounter any feelings of ill will towards the settlers who settled, that family.

I think for us that was an eye-opening experience, because for us perhaps there was a misperception that maybe there was some racism that was a part of that.

In the end, what Scott said about County Judge Carl Griffith, he didn’t even want the perception out there that the county was racist, and that is why he agreed to the name change.

I’m delighted that Wayne and Polly Wright and others are working with us on an historical marker that will be placed on the property of one of the residents on Boondocks Road, and in the end I think we’ll be paying tribute, proper tribute, to the Japanese settlers.

SANDRA TANAMACHI: I would like to make a comment about that, because when I first moved to Beaumont, the Boondocks Restaurant was a very popular catfish restaurant in the area.

There were billboards everywhere that advertised the Boondocks restaurant on Jap Road. So you didn’t have to live in Hamshire-Fannett to see the name of the road.

There was a billboard right next to Interstate 10, which is a major interstate that is traveled by thousands of people every year.

Also, there were commercials on the local television stations that stated, “Come eat delicious catfish at the Boondocks... on Jap Road.”

As I would drive to work, I could hear the same advertisements over the radio.

You didn’t have to just live in Fannett to be affected by the name of the road.

I was watching the 1992 Olympics when Kristi Yamaguchi was representing the United States in ice skating. After she had skated beautifully representing the U.S., she received a standing ovation, and then there was a cut away for local commercials. The commercial that came on was for the Boondocks restaurant on Jap Road!

The crossroads for Jap Road was Burrell Wingate Road. I met some of the Burrell and Wingate descendents, and they commented, “Oh, we’re so proud of the road being named Burrell Wingate Road, so why aren’t you proud of Jap Road?”

That road should have been named Mayumi Road. Houston has a Kobayashi Road; Houston has a Mykawa Road. Those roads are difficult to pronounce also, but they are honoring the Japanese pioneers. In Fannett,
they were able to honor their white settlers, Burrell and Wingate, but they did not honor Mr. Mayumi.

H. Concluding Remarks

HOANG QUAN VU:21 On behalf of the State Representative Martha Wong and the Asian American Bar Association, I’d like to thank James, George, Sandra, Jodi and Scott for taking the time to be here tonight and for providing us with their unique experiences, perspectives and viewpoints about the Jap Road controversy. In particular, I’d really like to applaud you for your efforts in helping people understand that racial slurs have no place in a diverse, multicultural society.

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21. President of the Asian American Bar Association of Houston.
Jap Road, Jefferson County
(http://home.att.net/%7Ehirasaki/Roads.htm)

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Jap Lane, Orange County
(http://home.att.net/%7Ehirasaki/Roads.htm)
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