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AAPI Equity Alliance Showcases Roots of AAPI Political Power With Asian American Trailblazers

Legendary CA Political Leaders Encourage New Generation

LOS ANGELES – AAPI Equity Alliance (AAPI Equity) and the Center for Asian Americans United for Self-Empowerment (CAUSE) hosted a panel at the Daniel K. Inouye National Center for the Preservation of Democracy (Democracy Center) on "Building Political Power with Asian American Trailblazers."

The January 18 conversation provided an opportunity for three Asian American political trailblazers – Honorable Warren Furutani, Maeley Tom, and Bill Wong – to share their leadership journeys. Furutani is a prominent civil rights activist involved in the early stages of the Asian American movement and former California State Assembly member. Tom was the first woman and the first ethnic minority to serve as Chief Administrative Officer of the California Assembly and as Chief of Staff to the President of the California State Senate. Wong was senior political advisor to then California Assembly Speaker Anthony Rendon and political director for several California Assembly Democrats.

With the hope of inspiring today's next generation of political and community leaders to collaborate and build power, the three shared important lessons that defined their political activism during a time where Asian Americans were invisible and lacked political power and influence in public policy.

"I felt so lucky to have had the opportunity to do what I did and to be able to break two glass ceilings in the Capitol, to be able to do my small part in developing a political voice for Asian Pacific Islander Americans during a time in the seventies where they were completely invisible and never mentioned in the halls," Tom said.

"When I talk to people, they don't see Asians as leaders," Wong said. "AAPIs do not see themselves because the rest of the world tells you that you're not a leader because we don't fill those roles in any type of narrative or any type of stories. And we're in an era that if we don't curate our stories, nobody will."

With the upcoming 2024 election, the speakers were asked what characteristics would make a great Asian American candidate., “If you're going to run for office, don't run because you want to be an elected official, run because you have something at stake,” Furutani said. He added that future leaders should run because they “have a vested interest in wanting to make change or to make things better or to improve the situation.”

Furutani, Tom and Wong were part of the beginnings of the AAPI social justice movement and longtime activists. “These three exemplary leaders have spent decades breaking barriers and affecting meaningful change for AAPI people and for all Californians, and from here we need to build upon their contributions to continue the movement today, especially as we head into the 2024 election,” said Manjusha P. Kulkarni, Executive Director of AAPI Equity.

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AAPI Equity Alliance (AAPI Equity) is a coalition of over 40 community based organizations serving the diverse needs of the 1.6 million Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in Los Angeles County and beyond. It is dedicated to improving the lives of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders through civic engagement, capacity building, and policy advocacy.