

San Francisco “Comfort Women” Column of Strength

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It was September 22, 2017. The cameras clicked, the audience roared and there it was, the first original memorial statue to the “Comfort Women” in a major U.S. city: San Francisco. In the statue, three young women—Chinese, Filipina, and Korean—face outward. They stand united, their hands clutching each other, sad but strong, looking at the world. They represent both those who didn’t survive and those who lived to tell the truth. Below them stands a life-size replica of Hak Soon Kim, the first Korean woman to break the silence about what happened to hundreds of thousands of women and girls who were sexually enslaved during World War II.

In July 2015, then San Francisco Board Supervisor Eric Mar, introduced Resolution 150-764 calling for the building of a “Comfort Women” memorial. The resolution, which also called for an end to sex trafficking, specifically stated the fact that the Imperial Japanese Forces were responsible for the building and maintaining of the “comfort women” system. It demanded that the Japanese government both issue an official apology and pay compensation to the surviving victims.

Organizers knew that a broad coalition would be necessary in order to get the resolution passed and once passed get the memorial built. Thus, the “Comfort Women” Justice Coalition (CWJC) was born. Led by retired Judges Lillian Sing and Julie Tang from the “Rape of Nanjing” Redress Coalition, CWJC is representative of the international population of the Bay Area. A multi-ethnic, multi-generational coalition of Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Filipino-Americans as well as activists from the women’s movement, human rights advocates, peace and Veterans groups, anti-imperialists, scholars and various others.

The coalition came together around a few basic principles and goals:

- 1) Build a memorial to the “comfort women” and against sex trafficking.
- 2) Demand from the Japanese government:
A full acknowledgement of the crime of sexual slavery, an official apology and reparations to the survivors.
- 3) The target is the Japanese Government, NOT the people.

The passage of the resolution would not be easy. The Japanese government was determined that no memorial for the “comfort women” victims in San Francisco would be built. Historical denialists would fight the statue every step of the way including at every public hearing. But CWJC’s diverse membership insured that hundreds would be present speaking in favor of the resolution when it was presented to the full Board of Supervisors.

Absolutely critical to the resolution’s passage was the presence of “Halmoni” Yong Soo Lee, who at age 15 was transported from her village in Korea to Taiwan and sexually enslaved for the Japanese military. At the age 86 in 2015, “Grandma” Lee came to SF to speak for the memorial:

“I came here as a living evidence of history and I want to tell this beautiful city to please lift my sadness and erect a memorial. I came as a witness to history but I am more than that: I

came here as an activist who is trying to solve this history, for the sake of women's rights around the world. And for the sake of these women, I am determined to solve this problem."

Even with this testimony and the hundreds who followed, the denialists fought back. Koichi Mera, a Japanese national and known denialist even went so far as to call Yong Soo Lee a prostitute and a liar! This kind of vicious attack was typical of the denialists' "fake news" version of history.

Yet despite these and other efforts by the government of Japan and its adherents, the resolution passed unanimously on September 22, 2015.

After more than 30 public hearings on subjects such as its location, inscription and design, the statue was approved and built on September 22, 2017. But the story wasn't over. Osaka Mayor Yoshimura threatened that he would end the 60-year "sister-city relationship if the city didn't remove the now installed memorial. The city refused and despite the abrogation of the relationship, the statue is there to stay!

Although building the memorial was its main concern, CWJC was also determined to get the true and full history of the sexual enslavement of hundreds of thousands of women and girls during WWII into the curriculum of local and state high schools. So, one of its first tasks was to go to the SF school board and ask to have a resolution passed mandating the teaching of the "comfort women" as part of World History. Again, the denialists tried to oppose the resolution, but the resolution passed unanimously and teaching SF tenth graders about this aspect of WWII is already under way. Thanks to the vigorous campaign led by CWJC and its partner organization in Southern California, KAFC (now CARE), California State Board of Education has also included the "comfort women" issue in its revised History/Social Science Framework for California's 10th Grade in 2016. It is now taught in California high schools. CWJC and CARE also developed a Teacher's Resource Guidebook including lesson plans that have been distributed for free throughout California and the nation. Members of CWJC have been involved in numerous conferences and spoken to countless classes and organizations.

CWJC is determined to keep the issue of the "comfort women" alive. Its latest project is to develop an "Eternal Testimony" wherein a computer generated program would allow visitors to ask questions to a "real" Chinese "comfort woman" survivor and get answers back in real time. It is also working to get thousands of "comfort women" documents and artifacts accepted as part of UNESCO's Memory of the World program.

Throughout all of its work, CWJC understands that the issue of justice for the "comfort women" has to be seen through the lens of women's human rights, racial justice and decolonialization.

CWJC is proud to be part of the worldwide movement for justice for the "comfort women" seeking an end to sex trafficking and fighting for justice and peace.