

Yui Ginther & Kikue Higuchi
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Multigenerational Family Businesses: Japantown's Anchors



The San Francisco Peace Pagoda seen from the Buchanan mall. (Picture by Yui Ginther)

Standing next to a display of a four-foot wide grid of 1,000 interlinked gold paper cranes, Linda Mihara greets each new customer with a wave and thanks them for sanitizing their hands. Three customers sort through a pack of cherry-red origami paper and talk about bringing more friends to the store. Before they leave, they wave to Mihara and promise to come back tomorrow. Mihara owns Paper Tree, one of Japantown's longest standing family businesses.

"Legacy businesses, particularly, the multigenerational family-owned businesses, are the very heart and soul of Japantown," says Kenji Taguma, editor-in-chief of the Nichi Bei Weekly, a Japanese American publication based in San Francisco. "They keep people coming in and they offer something that no one else does."

As the delta variant of the coronavirus surged in July of 2021, San Francisco's Japantown was desolate. Storefronts were covered with steel grates and the Japan Center Mall was deserted.

Neighborhood favorites like the Japanese homestyle restaurant Takara and snack shop Ichibankan shut their doors for good.

Now, in the early months of 2022 at the tail end of the omicron surge, the neighborhood swells with life. Diners from the Hinodeya Ramen Bar spill out onto the Buchanan Mall plaza, slurping up noodles. After they eat, they meander over to stores like Paper Tree.

“Everybody wants to come to Japan to eat ramen, or sushi or whatever and while they're here, they're getting a taste of culture by coming into my store,” says Mihara.

Introducing Origami Ambassador, Linda Mihara

A fixture of Japantown since 1968, Paper Tree is an origami specialty shop just beyond the iconic Buchanan Mall gate.

Every wall of the store is covered with paper – from cat patterned origami sheets to handmade washi paper of Japanese landscapes. Several glass cases feature owner Linda Mihara’s intricate origami, including a white dress with matching shoes in the back of the store.

Taguma sees Mihara and her store as the greatest ambassador for origami.

“They have lessons at their store that bring people into Japantown where they can learn more about culture,” says Taguma. “At Paper Tree, you can actually experience origami, you can actually fold paper.”

Mihara believes that legacy businesses like hers are a crucial part of Japantown’s identity.

“I mean, we're the anchor for Japantown,” she says. “Japantown has identified with these anchor businesses, I really feel that there's nowhere else where you can have that.”



Mihara stands next to some of her origami art pieces. (Picture by Yui Ginther)

When the pandemic began, Paper Tree was considered a nonessential business and forced to close. In order to survive, Mihara expanded her online store and offered free online origami classes every morning on Saturdays.

“While we were shut down, I did a thing with my windows – I noticed everybody was using their phone to do orders and stuff like that – so I put QR codes with all the merchandise in my front windows so they can scan and buy, and we can ship,” she explained. “That was happening before we got to open our doors to the public. So you have to be creative as a business owner and try to figure out a solution.”

Rosalyn Tonai, long-time customer and executive director of the nearby National Japanese American Historical Society, credits Mihara’s creativity for what Paper Tree offered the neighborhood during the height of the pandemic.

A Brief History of Paper Tree

Mihara’s father started Paper Tree in 1968, as a gift shop in the Japan Center Mall. When the store moved to its current location in the Buchanan Mall in 1974, it transformed into an office supply. A few years later, an Office Depot opened nearby and Paper Tree struggled to compete. Forced to reinvent themselves once again, the Miharas decided to focus on paper.

“Now we’re called the origami store, because we have probably the largest selection of origami paper on the planet anywhere,” Mihara says. “As well as the books and the beautiful handmade papers.”

“It was one of the few stores that could work with clientele, and provide a little hub of activity in the community,” Tonai says. “Her hearts project started off to commemorate the lives that were lost and give hope to the healthcare workers that were having to deal with the pandemic. That's a wonderful project that everyone can be involved in.”



Paper Tree's current window display. (Picture by Yui Ginther)

Hardware and Japanese Culture with the Ashizawas

Like Paper Tree, Soko Hardware has grown into an institution in the Japantown community. Owner Philip Ashizawa's grandparents, Naka and Masayasu Ashizawa, opened Soko in 1925.

Philip's son, David, who also works at the store, says Soko is one of the only establishments in the Bay Area that offers authentic Japanese homeware and kitchenware.

“Really it's a hardware store. But if you go into it, and particularly if you go downstairs, it's nothing like a hardware store. You could find anything from your Zojirushi rice cooker to traditional Japanese ceramics. It has the *byobu* multipanel screens, the lanterns and a lot of home decor stuff that you wouldn't expect from a hardware store,” says Taguma, who shopped exclusively in Japantown for everything from groceries to gifts during the pandemic to support

the community. “I think once you step in, and you realize what's there, you realize what a treasure it is. It's refreshingly cultural.”



Philip Ashizawa stands behind the front counter of Soko Hardware. (Picture by Yui Ginther)

Seeing his parents interact with customers over the years, David began to recognize the influence a multi-generational business like his family's has on Japantown.

“I think a lot of the newer businesses tend to defer to our judgment when it comes to making longer term decisions,” David Ashizawa says. “We'll have people from the neighborhood –businesses, employees and really long-time residents – just come in and talk about what's going on.”



Soko Hardware's first floor. (Picture by Yui Ginther)

Philip Ashizawa feels a responsibility to the Japanese American community that has allowed their families and businesses to thrive.

"The Japanese community originally was who supported the store. That's who all of our clients were," Philip says. "It's one of the reasons why we're still maintaining, or I'm still working the way I am, because I feel a little debt that I owe to the community."

When the pandemic started, Philip supported his community the best way he knew how: keeping his store open and maintaining a full payroll for his six employees.

A Brief History of Soko Hardware

Naka and Masayasu Ashizawa opened Soko Hardware in 1924. They opened Monday through Saturday without fail until the 1940s, when the family was interned in Topaz, Utah, during World War II. The Ashizawas moved their store to its current location in the Buchanan Mall upon returning to San Francisco. Naka and Masayasu's grandson, Philip, now runs the store alongside his wife Eunice and their son David.

Though the Ashizawas started out selling hardware to neighborhood residents, Soko Hardware has since evolved into a pseudo-gift shop. They still sell hardware, but now they also carry uniquely Japanese products like *takoyaki* pans or lacquer boxes called *jyubako*.

"Being in Japantown, we naturally focused on Japanese products and that's sort of how we evolved," says Philip. "We have Japanese household goods that you don't normally find anywhere else."

Supporting the Legacy of Paper Tree and Soko Hardware

Nikki Yoshikawa, a Pacifica-native, grew up shopping in Japantown for groceries and gifts. Through the years, she watched as the stores she frequented disappeared from the neighborhood. Paper Tree and Soko Hardware are some of the only businesses that remain from the Japantown of her childhood.

“At Paper Tree, of course, I loved any of the paper and the origami. I was kind of craftsy when I was younger, not so much now, but when I was young that always fascinated me,” Yoshikawa says. “Soko Hardware, as a kid I wasn’t really into that as much, I would just go in with my parents. But as an adult, I love all – especially the kitchenware downstairs – the bowls and different Japanese cookware.”

In 2018, Yoshikawa began working with the Japantown Task Force to help Japantown businesses apply for legacy businesses status with the city of San Francisco. Businesses on the official legacy business registry get specialized grants, which can range in purpose from rent assistance to accessibility renovations, and marketing help from the city.

Wanting to play a part in keeping their doors open, Yoshikawa helped Mihara and the Ashizawas apply in hopes that they could benefit financially from the program.

“A lot of those businesses that I was familiar with are gone. So I think that’s why another chord struck within me about helping to support these businesses and getting the recognition they deserve,” Yoshikawa says.

Yasukochi’s Sweet Stop and the Younger Generation

Lori Matoba, Deputy Director of the Japanese Cultural and Community Center of Northern California, says there are concerns in the Japanese American community about legacy businesses closing in the future. Benkyodo, a Japanese confectionery shop founded in 1906, is closing its doors on March 31 with its owners unable to find a buyer to take over the business.

“I definitely think there’s a sense of pride for a business to be around for over 100 years, that’s kind of amazing. But, I think at the same time, the preservation of these businesses is on the minds of a lot of community people,” says Matoba. “Family businesses are a little bit difficult. Do they transfer it over to somebody else? Or will somebody in the family step up and take it over?”

Taguma shares some of the same worries, but is encouraged by those in the younger generation stepping up to take over Japantown’s cornerstone institutions. He is particularly inspired by Kenji Yick, who took over Yasukochi’s Sweet Stop, a 48-year-old bakery in Japantown known for its coffee crunch cake.

“We want to keep our business going as long as possible,” says Yick. “I’ve had a lot of the longtime customers come in and say we’re so glad that you’re still here and we’re so glad that my grandfather found someone to keep the business going.”

Yick is the grandson of Hisao “Moses” and Hatsuye “Hatsy” Yasukochi, who opened the bakery in 1974. Though Moses and Hatsy’s daughters were not interested in continuing the business, Yick had fond memories helping his grandpa at the bakery and decided to take over the business in 2017 after attending culinary school.

“To me, personally, it’s about continuing our tradition,” says Yick. “We want to keep our business around so it’s something that people can always remember Japantown by.”