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CONTACT:

Nina Wallace, Media & Outreach Manager

nina.wallace@densho.org

(206) 320-0095 x104



Densho Founder Tom Ikeda Announces His Retirement

After 26 years with Ikeda leading efforts to preserve and share Japanese American WWII incarceration history, Densho launches a major national search for its next director.

SEATTLE, March 16, 2022 — Tom Ikeda, Founding Executive Director and longtime leader of Densho, an online archive and public history organization that documents the stories of Japanese Americans incarcerated during World War II, recently announced his pending retirement. A major national search for a dynamic new leader to take the helm is now underway.

Ikeda co-founded Densho in 1996, shepherding its growth from a small, volunteer-run oral history project to a “gold standard” digital archive that reaches over a million people across the globe each year. “I’ve poured my heart into Densho for the past 26 years,” he said. “I’m proud of our work to make sure that this history, and those who lived through it, are never forgotten.”

Densho’s vast collections—which contain over 1,000 oral histories and nearly 111,000 photos and other historic objects—are more than a passive archive. Through collaborations with educators, filmmakers, artists, activists, and more, Densho works to deepen understandings of American racism, xenophobia, and scapegoating, and to speak out against injustices both past and present.

“Tom’s a real trailblazer, not just in using digital technology to make this history more accessible but also in keeping it relevant and engaging the next generation,” said Board Chair Ron Tanemura. “We’re looking for someone who can bring that kind of future-focused vision and leadership to sustain Densho in the years to come.”

After vetting numerous firms with national reach and expertise in founding executive director transitions, Densho’s board and executive leadership selected Koya Partners to lead the search. The firm released a position profile this week and will begin interviewing interested candidates until the position is filled.

While this will be a major transition for the Seattle-based organization, Densho's board and staff are excited about the opportunity to grow in new directions. "Tom has spent his entire career, but especially the past several years, building a strong foundation," said Densho Deputy Director Geoff Froh. "He's leaving big shoes to fill, but he's made sure Densho is in a good place and that whoever comes in next will be able to lead the organization to exciting new places.

As for Ikeda, he plans to stay on until a new executive director has been selected and to help guide the transition process. "I want to be sure that I'm leaving Densho in good hands and that the next leader is really set up for success," he said. "This isn't an ending so much as the start of an exciting new chapter, for me and for Densho."

About Densho

Densho is a Japanese term meaning "to pass on to the next generation," or to leave a legacy. Densho documents the testimonies of Japanese Americans who were unjustly incarcerated during World War II before their memories are extinguished. We offer these irreplaceable firsthand accounts, coupled with historical images and teacher resources, to explore principles of democracy and promote equal justice for all. Learn more at www.densho.org.

About Koya Partners

Koya Partners, a part of the Diversified Search Group firm, is dedicated to connecting exceptionally talented people with mission-driven clients. Our founding philosophy—The Right Person in the Right Place Can Change the World—guides our work as we partner with nonprofits & NGOs, institutions of higher education, responsible businesses, and social enterprises in local communities and around the world. At Koya, we don't just accept difference—we celebrate it, support it, and thrive on it for the benefit of our team, our clients, and the communities we serve. Learn more at www.koyapartners.com.

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