

Nikkei Memory Capture Project and Nikka Yuko Japanese Garden collaboration earns international honour

University of Lethbridge researcher Dr. Carly Adams, along with University of Plymouth (UK) associate professor Dr. Darren Aoki (BA '90) and Michelle Day Miles of Nikka Yuko Japanese Garden have been recognized by the National Council on Public History (NCPH) with the Outstanding Public History Project Award – Small Institution.



In October 2024, a new interactive installation was added in the Dr. Robert Hironaka room at the Bunka Centre, the Mel Murakami Exhibit. Exploring the anti-Japanese racism and discrimination that were so formative in the pasts of individuals and communities, the Mel Murakami exhibit presents a story of hardship, overcoming and inspiration.

Aoki says the award is gratifying and respects the process that went into the making of the project.

“Initially, there was this sense of stunned disbelief: to have acknowledged in this way all those hours and days over years of effort that have gone into discovering and amplifying the histories of our Japanese Canadian community, and in the process, being part of an amazing team with Michelle to make it happen — this is so exciting and very special indeed,” he says. “More importantly, it is the generosity of all those individuals who shared their stories with us, many of whom are now sadly no longer with us, this award is really a recognition of their histories which so profoundly shape our community: we’re just the translators of this experience, and it is humbling and wonderful being able to celebrate their contributions in this way.”

Following is the award citation.

Outstanding Public History Project Award – Small Institution

Co-Creating Southern Alberta Japanese Canadian Histories: The Bunka Centre and Nikkei Memory Capture Project Heritage Collaboration Carly Adams, University of Lethbridge; Darren Aoki, University of Plymouth (United Kingdom); and Michelle Day Miles, Nikka Yuko Japanese Garden

Through oral histories and deep engagement with community, this unique and meaningful collaboration between the Bunka Centre at the Nikka Yuko Japanese Garden and the Nikkei Memory Capture Project returned the rich stories of southern Alberta’s Japanese Canadians to the community and made them publicly accessible in an evocative and transformative storytelling approach. This project with its marriage of place, memory and story is an exemplary model of what is possible when organizations engage with communities and individuals to tell stories that enrich our understanding of the historical, social and cultural contributions of its people. The collaboration reflects the community that nurtures the garden and southern Alberta.

“This collaboration serves as a tangible testament to the enduring legacy of Japanese Canadians in southern Alberta, providing a space where visitors can engage with and contribute to the rich tapestry of local history,” says Eric Granson, marketing and events manager at Nikka Yuko. “By housing the Nikkei Memory Capture Booth within the Bunka Centre, the garden not only preserves the stories of the Japanese community but also fosters a deeper understanding and appreciation among visitors. This initiative enriches the cultural landscape of Lethbridge and reinforces the garden’s role as a central hub for cultural exchange and education.

Award winners will be celebrated at the 2025 NCPH Annual Meeting awards breakfast and keynote, Mar. 29 in Montreal.

“The installation has been seen by thousands of visitors and the response has been overwhelmingly positive,” says Adams, director of the Centre for Oral History and Tradition (COHT). “The main objective of the project was to ‘return the stories’ to the

community by making these histories publicly accessible. Feedback on the exhibits and the stories shared have led to many new research directions and we hope to continue collaborating with the garden to develop future exhibits about different aspects of Japanese Canadian histories in southern Alberta.”

About the NCPH

The National Council on Public History, headquartered on the campus of Indiana University Indianapolis, is a membership association dedicated to making the past useful in the present and to encouraging collaboration between historians and their publics. Its work begins in the belief that historical understanding is of essential value in society. NCPH members include museum professionals, historical consultants, historians employed in government, archivists, historical administrators, corporate and business historians, cultural resource managers, curators, film and media producers, oral historians, policy advisers, professors and students with public history interests, teachers, and many others. Increasingly, the council has been working to advance public history on an international scale.

To view online: <https://www.ulethbridge.ca/unews/article/nikkei-memory-capture-project-and-nikka-yuko-japanese-garden-collaboration-earns>

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Our University's Blackfoot name is Iniskim, meaning Sacred Buffalo Stone. The University is located in traditional Blackfoot Confederacy territory. We honour the Blackfoot people and their traditional ways of knowing in caring for this land, as well as all Indigenous Peoples who have helped shape and continue to strengthen our University community.