Interview with Mazie K. Hirono, Congresswoman of Hawaii’s 2nd Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives.

You’re the first immigrant from Japan/Asia to serve in the House of Representatives. How did you get interested in politics and what are some of your challenges?

The I was born in Fukushima, Japan in 1947 and spent a lot of my time growing up before coming to this country on my grandparents rice farm until I was three, so I am a country girl. The reason for living with my grandparents was that my father had two illnesses. He was a compulsive gambler and an alcoholic, so the family faced difficulty. In 1955, my mother escaped the abusive marriage by emigrating to the U.S. with me and my older brother, because my younger brother was not old enough to go to school and there was no one to watch him.

Moving to Hawaii was a difficult decision and process as mother needed to take care of three children by herself. We came to Hawaii with one luggage each and started their new lives. I decided really early on that I would do something with my life that would give back to the country that gave me the opportunity to be where I am now.

ABOUT CONGRESSWOMAN HIRONO

Elected to Congress in 2006, Mazie K. Hirono is now serving her third term representing Hawaii’s 2nd Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives. The Congresswoman’s district includes rural Oahu, the seven Neighbor Islands, and the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands.

Congresswoman Hirono serves on two key U.S. House committees: the Committee on Education and the Workforce and the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure. In November of 2010, Democratic colleagues unanimously elected Hirono to serve on the House Democratic Steering and Policy Committee. Hirono is an executive board member of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus and the Congressional Progressive Caucus. She is also a member of many other caucuses focused on issues relevant to Hawaii.

Hirono’s legislative priorities include job creation, education, transportation, renewable energy, and the environment. The Congresswoman has been recognized for her leadership in advancing quality early education for America’s children. Pre-K Now, national preschool advocacy organization, named Hirono its 2008 “Pre-K Champion” for her work and determination in passing the PRE-K Act (H.R. 3289) out of the Committee on Education and Labor on June 25, 2008.

Born in Fukushima, Japan on November 3,1947, Hirono became a naturalized U.S. citizen in 1959, the year Hawaii became a state. She is the first immigrant woman of Asian ancestry to be sworn into Congressional office.

Educated in Hawaii’s public school system, Hirono graduated with honors from Kaimuki High School and Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Hawai’i at Manoa. She earned her law degree from Georgetown University Law Center in Washington, D.C., where she focused on public interest law.

After graduation, she returned to Hawai’i where she served as a Deputy Attorney General before entering private practice. In 1980, she was elected to the Hawai’i State House of Representatives.

In 1994, Hirono was elected and served two four-year terms as Hawaii’s 9th Lieutenant Governor.

Congresswoman Hirono is married to Leighton Kim Oshima.
During my college years at UH Manoa, I was engaged in a summer project with Waimanalo youth and community. Doing this project made me become interested in helping families to overcome challenges, promote education for youth and make a difference in other’s lives. In addition I participated in protests against the Vietnam War and saw politics making significant social changes.

With the motive to better the lives of others and make positive social changes, I went to law school, because women of my generation generally expectations were not that we would become lawyers or politicians, so I did take a path that was non-traditional. I feel very grateful that I can contribute to the state of Hawai’i by being a Congresswoman and fight for the commoners, the middle-class working families. That’s how I made the commitment to really be engaged in the political life of my community.

What are the advantages and disadvantages being a female congressional leader from the Pacific?

There are too few of us women in congress, and basically at all levels of decision-making. I am part of the Congressional Asia-Pacific American Caucus. We joined forces with the Congressional Black Caucus and the Congressional Hispanic Caucus. We have many issues in common and I do feel a special responsibility to advocate for minority communities and the APIA community through my work with CAPAC.

When the numbers are few, you ban together and find others with a common purpose and goals, therefore you can have an impact far greater than individually.

With the relationships that we build we can all help each other. I’ve worked with John Young of Alaska, who is a long serving Republican. We’ve worked together to attain funding for Native American and Alaskan education.

I recently introduced a bill with Walter Jones of North Carolina, who is a long-term Republican. He co-sponsored the bill called the Continuum of Learning Act. These are examples of opportunities to work in a bipartisan way, even in this environment which has become extremely partisan.

Can you tell us about the APEC Women and the Economy Summit that you attended in San Francisco?

I was so very happy to have had an opportunity to attend this meeting. I met many inspirational women and heard their visions. I commend U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton when she made the statement that women need to be engaged in their communities and villages when it comes to their economies. There are so many areas where women’s talents are not being fully presented, here in the United States is no exception.

When a government fosters the efforts of women and supports their small and mid-size businesses, it’s good for everyone. It just makes so much sense, because women are practical minded.

What are your thoughts about the 2011 APEC Summit being held in Hawai’i and what will be your involvement?

I think that this is a great opportunity for Hawai’i to put its best foot forward. This is truly a unique and positive position that we are in. We have an opportunity to showcase innovations and the aloha way of conducting ourselves. I will be attending some of the meetings and events. If you see me, please say hello!

What advice would you give to women leaders and those getting an education who will be attending the APEC Summit?

I always acknowledge the fact that my mother totally changed my life. She taught me that one person can change a life. There are so many ways that women can get involved, but I think that it starts with the desire to make a difference, and to realize that each of us can make a difference.

Remember that and continue to serve others. Believing that you can make a difference in someone’s live gives you a power to make a change and different in the society. Having the desire to make a difference is crucial.