

Freedom Riders Seijin Tranberg and Joshua Wildman Cheered by Rights Activists in Los Angeles

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Seijin Tranberg, Joshua Wildman, and their parents pose for a photo with Dr. Nicholas Benson, Imam Haitham Bundakji, and Luke Higuchi

On a sunny day in downtown Los Angeles, John Seijin Tranberg and Joshua Wildman biked in toward the finish line of their 2,300-mile journey for victims of abduction in Japan. They had begun the Faith, Freedom and Family ride at the State Capitol in Atlanta 45 days before. Awaiting them at the Japanese-American Cultural Community Center (JACCC) in LA's "Little Tokyo" was a rally intent on bringing awareness of religious persecution of religious people around the world. After breaking through the finish line, they made a victory lap around the crowd, all the while showered with cheers and confetti. The gathering of ministers and Unificationists congratulated them and listened intently to a teach-in about the seriousness of faith-breaking efforts against Unificationists in Japan. In attendance were representatives from multiple religious groups gathered for the cause of religious freedom.



Dr. Nicholas Benson gives a touching speech with young Unificationists wearing kimonos in the background.

Welcoming Tranberg and Wildman to the JACCC were about 60 supporters joined by another 100 people coming and going, listening to parts of the rally throughout the day. The rally started with performances from the rock band *Origin*, whose musicians later said that they felt the grace of the day.

“I had a good time singing. It was an honor to sing for a worthy cause,” said Daejo Garratt, lead singer of *Origin*. “Seeing people come together impacted me, because Seijin and Josh weren't asked to do this. No one was asked to rally for Japan, but they did it anyway,” he said. “Keeping loved ones in your heart and standing up for them even when they don't ask. It was powerful.”

Luke Higuchi, president of a victims' support group called Survivors Against Forced Exit (SAFE) gave the opening

speech with a testimony of his own experience of being captured by deprogrammers. Kazue Saberan, a Japanese-American resident of Tarzana, CA, shared her experiences as well.

"When I was 19 years old, I met the Unification Church and the life-giving truth from Rev. and Mrs. Moon," she said. "As I was preparing to join the Unification Church in 1985, I was kidnapped by a communist group, and they kept me in one place against my will for three months. When I found the chance to run away, I did." Her words underscored a vast improvement to her life after escaping the faithbreakers. She explained, "I was married to Mr. Mansoor Saberan in 1989. I have three beautiful children who are the loves of my life. I am very proud of my family because I can feel that God is in my family every day, and I can see God's blessing in my children. My life has not been without challenges, and I never expected it to be. But I am living my dream. Every day that I live, I thank God I stayed faithful to Jesus and to the founders of the Unification Church."

Imam Haitham Bundakji of the Orange County Islamic Society addressed the importance of religious freedom. As a highly distinguished Muslim leader, he has traveled to Washington D.C. to speak to senators about religious freedom. He asked us, the audience, to join him in this battle, saying, "Let's be united, let's be together; Muslim, Christians, and Jews. Just as the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were bombs of hatred, it's a bomb of hatred when you kidnap someone to prevent them from practicing their religion."

Although scheduled to speak, Don Garrick, a prominent Mormon and a leader in interfaith activities, fell sick. Yet, he still felt he needed to write words to support the rally. Susan Munsell read a written testimony from Mr. Garrick on his behalf, saying, "Religious persecution is real. We have seen it and experienced it. There is still a battle ahead of us, but there is also victory ahead of us, and the victory starts here today. Thank you Mr. Tranberg and Mr. Wildman for sharing your victory with us!"

Dr. Nicholas Bensen, a Lutheran clergyman, said he was surprised and devastated to see a democratic country such as Japan subject to criminal practices. He invoked the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who said in 1963: "Injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere." Dr. Benson enjoined the crowd to stick together: "We cannot let any of us, one group, be subject to this injustice. One group affects us all."

Don Makowski then read a letter of endorsement of the Freedom Ride from Congressman Trent Franks of Arizona.

Tranberg told the well-wishers that he couldn't believe he had made it so far. He completed his speech by giving Higuchi a tree of 1,000 paper cranes that was prepared by the community. As the Japanese legend goes, making 1,000 cranes will bring the power to grant one wish. Truly, on this special occasion, many members and guests were united in wishing for fair treatment and religious freedom for our brothers and sisters in Japan.

Despite the celebratory nature of the day, we were fully aware that the fight for religious freedom must continue to be fought. Tranberg and Wildman may have blazed a path, but it is up to all of us to pave it.



Kazue Saberan, a survivor of "deprogramming," gave a moving testimony about her experience.

The following are testimonies at the rally:

"The event was very special and a necessary function in which representatives from different faiths get together to support

Unification Church members to promote the highest values (human rights and freedom of religion) which come from Heavenly Father. Bike riders Seijin and Josh did a wonderful job; that was a testimony to the power of youth and God's justice represented by them, and all that participants can join in heart with the suffering people in Japan – as well as with all the people who are suffering this religious persecution. We as God's children continually support this cause.”

Rev. Carlos Torres, Christian Minister

“Going there made me aware that places like Japan don't have religious freedom. This isn't just about Unificationists, but about everyone. It makes me both angry and sad; it makes me want to do more. It strengthens my personal resolve to hold onto my own faith. I am grateful that Seijin and Josh took a stand. I hope it gets better for both myself and others.”

Takafumi Sasaki, 22, Alhambra, CA

“It is remarkable that Seijin and Josh would do this partially for their own personal growth, but also to make an impact in the world. It's outstanding that they would take time out from their busy lives, especially as young people, to bring light to this issue for others, in such a drastic way. The rally itself was beautiful, because everybody there came to fight for something important, especially because they supported something that hasn't directly affected them. Their heart was to look after their global brothers and sisters. I hope that everybody can experience the right that we enjoy as Americans. I am proud to be a Unificationist, because we are taking action. I am proud to be one family under God.”

Juliannah Vasquez, 20, Downey, CA

“I thought it was wonderful. What made the biggest impact to me was Kazue's testimony. I've known her for a long time, but I had no idea that she was kidnapped and tortured. Through both her testimony and that of Luke Higuchi, I realized that it's not just a parents' issue. There is the third party of kidnappers and torturers who go out to the parents to 'save' the children. It's not just a parents' issue. It's an issue concerning kidnappers who are torturing faith-believing people. I came to attend and support my friend, but I left shaking from the truth of the testimonies. I am very impressed by Kazue and glad that she is happy and blessed with children.”

Yoshiko McClellan, Claremont, CA

“I have known Kazue for a long time, but I didn't know that she had been kidnapped and tortured. It hits a lot closer to home when it happens to somebody you know. I am impressed with Seijin and Josh. They are very admirable. They are causing a ripple effect that affects everyone in its path. It brought tears to my eyes when I listened to the testimonies [of the Japanese victims]. As I listened, in my head I said to myself, 'What confused and brutal parents they had.' I feel that kidnapping and torturing someone is worse than killing that person. Because it not just kills their spiritual body but it destroys their mind, freedom, faith, and dignity, which are the most beautiful parts about a person, the aspect of a person that is gifted by God. I am very moved and very inspired and wish to go to Japan to help.”

Nasser and Ulrike Zomorod, Arcadia, CA