

Boston getting mayor of color as Wu, Essaibi George advance

By STEVE LeBLANC
Associated Press

BOSTON — For the first time in 200 years, Boston voters have narrowed the field of mayoral candidates to two women of color who will face off against each other in November.

City Councilors Michelle Wu and Anissa Essaibi George topped the five-person race in the Sept. 14 preliminary runoff. They bested acting Mayor Kim Janey, City Councilor Andrea Campbell and John Barros, the city's former economic development chief. All five were candidates of color — a major shift away from two centuries of Boston politics dominated by white men.

Wu's parents immigrated to the U.S. from Taiwan. Essaibi George describes herself as a first generation Arab Polish-American.

Whoever wins on Nov. 2 will make history in a city that has never elected a woman or Asian American mayor. For the past 200 years, the office has been held exclusively by white men.

Wu and Essaibi George's advancement to the general election ushers in a new era for the city which has wrestled with racial and ethnic strife.

Essaibi George said she was confident she could pose a significant challenge to Wu in November.

"I am so grateful to you showing up not just tonight but showing up for the last eight months," she told supporters.

Wu spoke to reporters outside Boston City Hall on Sept. 15. "This is the moment in Boston that our campaign and our coalition has been calling for for a long time," she said. "We got in this race over a year ago — actually exactly a year ago today — to ensure that Boston would step up to meet this moment."

Essaibi George in her victory speech said the mayor of Boston can't unilaterally restore rent control — a job at Wu, who wants to revive a version of rent control, or rent stabilization, which was banned statewide by a 1994 ballot question.

Wu pushed back, saying she's addressed tough challenges during her years as a city councilor.

"We took on issues that people said were pie in the sky, would be impossible to accomplish but by building coalitions, working across all levels of government and continuing to bring community members to the table, we knocked those down, one by one," she said.

Earlier this year, Janey became the first Black Bostonian and first woman to occupy the city's top office in an acting capacity after former Mayor Marty Walsh stepped down to become President Joe Biden's labor secretary.

There had been an effort among some leaders in the Black community to rally around a single candidate to ensure that at least one Black mayoral hopeful could claim one of the two top slots.

All of the candidates were Democrats. Mayoral races in Boston do not include party primaries.

Wu was elected to the Boston City Council in 2013 at age 28, becoming the first Asian-American woman to serve on the council. In 2016, she was elected city council president by her colleagues in a unanimous vote, becoming the first woman of color to serve as president.

Essaibi George won a series of key endorsements during the race including from unions representing firefighters, nurses and emergency medical technicians. She also won the backing of former Boston Police Commissioner William Gross.

Essaibi George grew up in the city's Dorchester neighborhood and taught in the Boston Public Schools. She was elected to the city council in 2015. Her father immigrated to the United States from Tunisia in 1972. Her mother was born in a displaced persons' camp in Germany of Polish parents.

The November contest could also be a test of whether voters in a city long dominated by parochial neighborhood and ethnic politics are ready to tap someone like Wu, who grew up in Chicago. Wu moved to Boston to attend Harvard University and Harvard Law School and studied under U.S. Sen. Elizabeth Warren, then a law professor. She's the only candidate not born in Boston.

Boston has changed radically since the 1970s and 1980s, when it was overwhelmingly white and was riven by racial tensions. Today, while still struggling to overcome its racist legacy, it's a majority minority city: The latest U.S. Census statistics show residents who identify as white make up 44.6% of the population compared to Black residents (19.1%), Latino residents (18.7%) and residents of Asian descent (11.2%).

Community laments the pending closure of the Moraga Garden Center

By TOMO HIRAI
Nichi Bei Weekly

MORAGA, Calif. — Fifty years on, the Moraga Garden Center plans to close its doors Oct. 31 after its owner Kenneth "Kenny" Murakami announced his retirement earlier this year. The nursery, a beloved institution for Moraga community gardeners, sells hard to find plants.

Murakami said his father, Nadao "Bob" Murakami, started the nursery in 1971. While the elder Murakami launched the business as a means to ease into retirement, having worked as a landscape architect and contractor, his son said his father was not particularly well suited for retail.

Murakami started working part-time at his father's nursery in high school and continued to work, without pay, while attending the University of California, Berkeley. He said he thought about going into research, working in the biological sciences, but found he preferred being outside. After working internships sexing bark beetles and examining fungi on tree roots, he opted to spend more time working at the nursery.

Since then, Murakami has used his knowledge in the sciences to sell plants that were uncommon to the San Francisco Bay Area. The nurseryman said he has sold curry leaf from India, Yerba Mate from South America, medlar from Europe and jujube from China. Among Japanese plants, he stocked maples, camellias, *rakkyo* (onion), *myoga* (Japanese ginger) and *wasabi* (Japanese horseradish).

Murakami said he collected the plants over the years as word of mouth among gardeners spread about his wide selection of rare plants. Collectors offered to trade him new plants and his stock grew, but ensuring each variety was ready to sell took time and effort.

"That's actually not very practical for a retail nursery, but that's how you get the unusual things."

The Garden Center's wide selection and Murakami's wealth of botanical knowledge attracted customers from all over, and many of his patrons befriended him, in part because of his patience and affable nature.

Yassine "Yaz" Guergah visited Murakami's shop by chance when he purchased his Moraga home in 1998. While browsing for orange trees, Guergah found an "Algerian Mandarin" tree.

"I said, 'there is no way,'" Guergah, who immigrated to America in 1981 from Algeria, said. "... At that time, in 1998, there were very few Algerians in the United States, there's nothing you can buy that's made from Algeria. So (this) ... was an incredibly wonderful thing to see."

Guergah bought two trees from the Moraga Garden Center and has been a customer since. Three of his children have worked summer jobs at the garden center. He said he discussed the rise of anti-Islamic hate since 9/11 and the Japanese American experience with Murakami. He recalled Murakami's quiet and gentle support when he sought solace from the nursery after being diagnosed with stage four cancer five years ago.

San Francisco resident Takeshi Moro first visited the Moraga Garden Center while searching for an *ume* (Japanese plum) tree as a COVID-19 quarantine garden project, which sparked a newfound passion for horticulture.

"We looked all around the Bay Area, and practically he was the only person who carried it," Moro said.

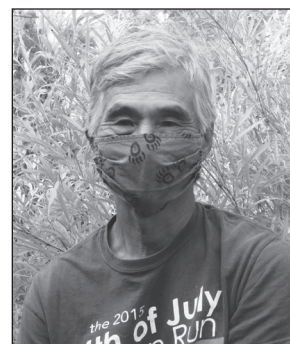
Since learning about the Garden Center's wide selection of Japanese plants, Moro said his family has purchased many of the Japanese plants that were for sale, especially after learning the business was closing.

"We bought far more plants than one would actually need, because we made excuses just to go," he said.

Murakami has impacted many people over the years. According to Bobbie Preston, a Moraga Garden Club board member, Murakami has given discounts, gifts and knowledge to the club over the years and become an indispensable ally to the club's work.

"Kenny's been instrumental in helping us solve problems, and is our go-to guy when there's something we can't figure out. And that's pretty much true of all of his clients," Preston told the *Nichi Bei Weekly*. "He's been extremely helpful in teaching people how to prune out the pear blight, the fire blight, which has affected the 108-year-old pear orchard in Moraga. This pear orchard was part of the Del Monte's original pear orchard."

News of the nursery's closing has devastated Muraka-



SET TO CLOSE — The Moraga Garden Center (above), a nursery started by Nadao "Bob" Murakami in 1971 and now run by his son Kenneth "Kenny" Murakami, will close at the end of the month.
photo by Takeshi Moro

Kenny Murakami
photo by Tomo Hirai/
Nichi Bei Weekly

mi's customers. Preston characterized it as "emotionally catastrophic."

"I can't imagine not being able to go to Kenny's and just find some plants I love and just see him. He is a very good friend, and I will miss him terribly, more than I will miss the Garden Center," Preston said. "There's nobody who knows plants like Kenny anywhere around. There are plants, but there's no other Kenny."

Several customers attributed the Moraga Garden Center's closing to an Americans with Disabilities Act lawsuit by a "serial plaintiff," but Murakami said he was planning to retire by 2023, when he turns 70. Citing the long strenuous hours, especially during the spring, and his wife's worsening Parkinson's disease, Murakami said he likely would have closed the business this year anyway.

Still, the lawsuit, which found the Moraga Garden Center's office was inaccessible to wheelchairs and that pathways were two inches too narrow, prompted the community to offer Murakami help, which he declined. Murakami, however, agreed to accept proceeds from a photo book Moro photographed and produced in collaboration with Preston.

Moro, an associate professor of studio art at Santa Clara University, started working on the book after learning about the nursery's closing. He photographed 60 gardens and two employees associated with the business. Moro said they plan to produce 200 books, which Preston will sell and distribute at local businesses in the Lamorinda area. Some 125 books have already been reserved as of press time.

Murakami, who has shied away from interviews and the limelight in the past, said he felt embarrassed taking the proceeds, but accepted the help. He said he was surprised so many people cared so deeply about his nursery. In retirement, he plans to care for his wife Karen Murakami, focus on his long-neglected home garden and to potentially volunteer as a docent for the University of California Botanical Garden at Berkeley.

"You know, I don't promote myself, I think you just find what you do best and what you like to do best and you just do it, and then you just hope people appreciate it," Murakami said. "So when people started coming in and crying and thanking me, I was kind of taken aback because I didn't actually expect that kind of thing. I didn't expect that kind of emotional response from a lot of our customers."

"I'm really thankful that I have been able to have such a long enjoyable career doing something that I love to do, and appreciate all my customers, because they're the ones that made the business."

To obtain a copy of Moro's book, or to donate to Murakami's retirement fund, contact Bobbie Preston at barbarampreston@comcast.net. Books cost \$50 each, and may be picked up at several local businesses located in and around the Town of Moraga including the Moraga Garden Center, at 1400 Moraga Road, Moraga, Calif.