



On Being First

(April 2021) - On March 11, 2021, Nicole Yamase, a University of Hawai'i student from Pohnpei became the first Pacific Islander to descend into the Challenger Deep, 36,000 feet below sea-level, the deepest spot on earth. In an [interview](#) following her expedition, she spoke of not being afraid to be the “first” and shared a story with which I could identify.



Nicole Yamase (photo: [The Guardian](#))

I also grew up on Pohnpei in the Federated States of Micronesia, a former Trust Territory of the United States. My cousins and I would go swimming all the time - in the ocean, rivers, and waterfalls - rain or shine! But when we first came to the edge of the water, there was something about needing someone to go first. We would all line up looking at the water coaxing someone else to make the first jump. We would be shouting, “You go, no you! You!” This usually went on for a minute or two, but once the first kid jumped, another would soon follow, and then another, and then another. Before you knew it, all the kids would be swimming and enjoying the water, but we always needed that “first” to get things moving.



AAPI Townhall Panel with the Secretary (Lena, Kelly, Thomas, Tanya, Secretary Haaland). Photo courtesy of FAPAC and Dou-Shuan Yang.

On Friday, April 16, I shared some of my own experiences as an American Pacific Islander at an Interior Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) Town Hall. It was convened by the [Office of](#)

[Diversity, Inclusion, and Civil Rights](#) and [FAPAC](#) at the request of Secretary Debra Haaland and her team to address the increase in anti-AAPI discrimination and racism. Kelly Sewell of the Office of Human Capital, Thomas Liu of the Bureau of Ocean Energy and Management, and myself from the Office of Insular Affairs participated with Lena Chang of Fish and Wildlife Services moderating.

Having Secretary Haaland as the first Native American woman to head the Department is historic and symbolic. That she would spend time to address the AAAP panel was hopeful. It was an important first step towards inspiring better allyship, more awareness, courtesy, and hopefully respect for one another.

There is a Pohnpeian saying that goes something like this: ‘*Sapwaniki aramas mwahusang sapwaniki sahpw*’ which means to say that relationships with people are more important than owning land. To Pacific Islanders, land is an extremely limited resource, and is the basis for their very livelihood. The land is life itself. So, to say that people are more important than land is saying something.

The following week on April 21, following the verdict rendered in Minneapolis, Secretary Haaland released a statement on the [Path Ahead for Racial Equity](#). We are in this together and must support one another. *Kalahngan en Komwi Maing* Secretary.

By Tanya Harris Joshua, Deputy Policy Director and Communications Lead, Office of Insular Affairs. Any opinions expressed are my own.