

Honoring Pride Month

Insights

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This Pride Month, HLB is proud to honor civil rights activist and trailblazer, Mia Yamamoto. A longtime Los Angeles-based public defender and [advocate](#), Yamamoto became the first openly trans trial lawyer in the State of California at the age of [60](#).

In Yamamoto's words, she was "born doing time," beginning her life in a Japanese internment camp in Arizona during World War II.[\[1\]](#) She recalls her father, an ACLU lawyer, went around the internment camp, telling people that the government "couldn't just throw people in jail because of their race" – an experience which would later impact her decision to become a criminal defense attorney.[\[2\]](#)

After serving in the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War, Yamamoto attended UCLA School of Law, where she co-founded the first Asian Pacific Islander Law Student Association at the school, and worked to create solidarity among other minority student groups to focus on issues of diversity.[\[3\]](#)

Following law school, Yamamoto became a public defender with the Los Angeles Public Defender's Office, where she tried over 200 jury trials and represented thousands of clients.[\[4\]](#) She notes that her own experiences being incarcerated from birth because of her race helped her advocate on behalf of her clients facing racial discrimination in the criminal justice system.[\[5\]](#) In 2003, at the age of 60, Yamamoto made the decision to publicly transition.[\[6\]](#)

Yamamoto believes her public pride in being transgender helped influence others to come out, and that transgender issues are important to all members of society. "It is incumbent upon good people to stand up for transgender people, and it's incumbent upon transgender people, in my opinion, to stand up for the rights of all oppressed people as well."[\[7\]](#)

Yamamoto has served on the commission on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity for the American Bar Association, and has received numerous awards, including the City of West Hollywood's Golden Key Award, Lambda Legal's Liberty Award, and the Christopher Street West/LA Pride's Harvey Milk Legacy Award. She has also been honored by API Equality and the Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission for her advocacy on behalf of the LGBT community.[\[8\]](#)

Rooted in her experiences with incarceration, war, racism, and transmisogyny, Mia has long been an advocate for LGBTQ communities, communities of color, and other oppressed people.

In honor of Pride Month, HLB celebrates Mia's words:

"Every trans person should aspire to everything. Be the greatest lead singer in a band, be the best politician, be the greatest lawyer you can be. All those things are going to be available because people fought for us, people advocated for us, people opened doors and made space for us. And you're gonna have to return that favor and pay it forward for the next generation. Nothing good happens without all of us doing it together. This is one movement that you have to get active in, not just for yourself, but for the world—for us to experience a measure of justice, equality, inclusion."[\[9\]](#)

[\[1\] Criminal Defense Mia Yamamoto Attorney Talks Race, Identity, Community \(nbcnews.com\)](#)

[\[2\] Ibid.](#)

[\[3\] The JABA Legacy Project: Mia Yamamoto—A Leader Who Defined the Nikkei Community – Part 1 – Discover Nikkei](#)

[\[4\] Criminal Defense Mia Yamamoto Attorney Talks Race, Identity, Community \(nbcnews.com\)](#)

[\[5\] Ibid.](#)

[\[6\] Mia Yamamoto: The Leading Transgender Lawyer Who Came Out Late in Her Career \(vice.com\)](#)

[\[7\] California's First Openly Trans Trial Lawyer Fights for Equality for All](#)

[\[8\] Mia Yamamoto | THE LAVENDER EFFECT®](#)

[\[9\] Mia Yamamoto: The Leading Transgender Lawyer Who Came Out Late in Her Career \(vice.com\)](#)