

Shigeko Uppuluri and our Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on February 29, 2016)

She has been said to be “soft-spoken and unassuming,” and a person of “inner peace and outer strength.” Shigeko Uppuluri is my friend and someone I admire greatly. I have interacted with her when she helps Japanese children appreciate Oak Ridge. She assisted me greatly in the series of Historically Speaking columns documenting the history of the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell. I am excited to bring you the following article about an Oak Ridge icon, Shigeko Uppuluri, written by Carolyn Krause.

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Shigeko Uppuluri played a key role in bringing the International Friendship Bell to Oak Ridge -- a unique four-ton bronze bell in Bissell Park that was cast in Japan according to the original design of Susanna Harris of Oak Ridge.

Shigeko was also on the team that established a student exchange program in 1990 between Oak Ridge and Naka, Japan, in which ten students and two teachers come to Oak Ridge from Naka, our sister city in Japan, and vice versa. Clearly, she has helped improve relations on a people-to-people basis between the United States and Japan.

In 2012, local filmmaker Keith McDaniel interviewed her for the Center for Oak Ridge Oral History (COROH) of the Oak Ridge Public Library. Her oral history and a section of Alvin Weinberg's “The First Nuclear Era” tell the story of the International Friendship Bell, the controversy it stirred up and its importance to Oak Ridge and Hiroshima.

Weinberg, retired director of Oak Ridge National Laboratory, summarized the connection well: “Oak Ridge and Hiroshima are forever intertwined: Oak Ridge, where the uranium-235 for the ‘Little Boy’ bomb was produced; Hiroshima, where Little Boy wreaked its destruction and showed the world what nuclear war meant.”

A native of Kyoto, Japan, who has lived in the United States for 58 years, Shigeko came to the U.S. in 1958 on a scholarship she won upon graduation from a college in Japan.

She did graduate work in anthropology at Indiana University, where she met her future husband, mathematician Ram Uppuluri, a native of India. “The Anthropology Department was next to the Math Department,” she said.

After they were married, the couple had their first and only child in 1961, a son, also named Ram.

Then the family moved to Oak Ridge in 1963 because her husband Ram, who had earned his Ph.D. degree, wanted to work in mathematics in the nuclear science area. He took a math position at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory and later wrote the column “Take a Number” in the ORNL Review, the lab's research magazine.

Their son grew up in Oak Ridge, did well in school and enjoyed playing sports. He now lives in Washington, D.C., with his wife Jackie and their son Adam.

After Ram entered high school, Shigeko started her career. She received a call in 1976 from someone at ORNL. “Do you speak Japanese?” she was asked. “That's the only language I speak well,” she replied.

As she told McDaniel, ORNL researchers were trying to get more scientific information “from Japanese journals and they were looking for someone who could read and translate them into English. That's how I was hired at ORNL.” Later at ORNL, she helped build a database containing information on different chemicals that cause cancer or birth defects.

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She retired from ORNL in 1991 because her husband suffered from a kidney problem and needed regular dialysis, denying him the possibility of travel. Then he received a kidney transplant and was able to travel again. He died in July 1995.

Shigeko told McDaniel that her husband first broached the idea of a Japanese bell for Oak Ridge in 1980 when they visited Japan and saw "a huge, hanging bell in a temple." Shigeko initially thought he was "crazy." But she remembered him saying, "It will last for a long time and you don't have to clean it everyday or put it in an air-conditioned room."

Ram proposed the bell idea again in Oak Ridge when the Oak Ridge Community Foundation asked citizens to suggest ideas for a peace monument as part of the celebration of the 50th anniversary of Oak Ridge's founding in 1942. The Uppuluris' American and Japanese friends liked the idea.

Ram and Shigeko met the Japanese scientist Dr. Kamata and his wife and told them about their bell idea. His wife said something like, "My sister lives in Kyoto and knows a bell maker named Sotetsu Iwasawa, who lives in the next neighborhood." Shigeko wrote a letter to Iwasawa about their interest in having a bell cast in Japan. Iwasawa visited Oak Ridge in spring 1993 and checked the Bissell Park site where the bell house was to be built.

In the summer Shigeko led faculty members from the University of Tennessee, to whom she had taught Japanese, on a tour of Japan, including Muroran, Knoxville's sister city, and Hiroshima.

On July 14, a festival day in Japan, the Uppuluris, Herman Postma, a retired ORNL director, and his wife Pat, who taught economics at UT, along with the UT group on the tour, visited the bell maker in his foundry in Kyoto.

They watched Iwasawa cast the bell destined for Oak Ridge and then joined in a festival celebration. He told them the cost and payment schedule. Ram and Shigeko knew donations were needed to pay for the bell, so they approached Weinberg, who then organized and chaired the International Friendship Bell committee. "My main task was to help raise the \$150,000 needed to carry out the project," he wrote.

The funding came from individuals and firms in Oak Ridge, former participants in the Manhattan Project, foundations, Japanese companies with U.S. connections and Japanese individuals. Shigeko recalled that Weinberg once offered to sell his gold medal from the American Physical Society for \$10,000 to give to the bell project.

Weinberg had been writing and speaking about how an historical event – the observance of Hiroshima Day on Aug. 6 in the Hiroshima Peace Park – had acquired religious significance, strengthening what Tom Schelling called the "tradition of nonuse of nuclear weapons" and imposing a "social taboo" that forbids future use of nuclear weapons to destroy cities and their populations.

The idea of erecting a "peace" bell in Oak Ridge was controversial. As Weinberg wrote in 1993, "We have encountered opposition from people who regard our Friendship Bell as an unbecoming gesture of apology for Hiroshima – especially in view of the attack on Pearl Harbor and the vicious behavior of the Japanese military in China during the war. I try to insist that our bell is not by way of apology, but is a recognition of the connection between Oak Ridge and Hiroshima. More than that, it is a tangible, though small, step toward the sanctification of Hiroshima."

Once the Oak Ridge bell was cast, the question was how best to get it from Japan to Oak Ridge. Shigeko told her brother, a newspaper reporter in Japan, about the problem. He contacted the Honda Motor Company and learned that Honda was willing to transport the bell for free. Shigeko

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visited the company and learned it would replace one Honda car in a crate with the four-ton bell before placing all the crates on a ship to Savannah, Ga. "Honda insured all their transportation on the ocean," Shigeko said. "We didn't have to pay a penny."

The next problem was to get the bell to Oak Ridge from the ship docked in Savannah. Postma had the solution. He told the committee that containers of low-level radioactive wastes are trucked from ORNL periodically to the Savannah port and loaded onto a Russian ship. Normally, the truck comes back empty. Postma arranged to have the crate holding the bell placed in the empty truck to get it to Oak Ridge. One day it arrived at City Hall.

Shigeko, who was there, said that when the crate was opened and the bell pulled out, she and the Postmas found 400 small replicas of the big Oak Ridge bell. Iwasawa, the bell maker, had suggested that they sell the little bells for \$250 apiece to help raise funds to build a pavilion to house the seven-foot-tall, five-foot-wide bell. He had kept 100 of the small bells in Japan and asked many of his friends to buy them to help cover the cost of the bell. Most of the little bells were sold.

The International Friendship Bell was dedicated on May 3-4, 1996, almost 20 years ago.

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Thank you Carolyn! I am so pleased to see Shigeko being recognized for her enormous contribution to Oak Ridge and Japan over the years. In addition to her pivotal role with the Friendship Bell, she has also helped many Japanese visitors better appreciate their visit to Oak Ridge and to better understand East Tennessee and the nation.

Not only did she work hard on the initial effort to obtain the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell, but also she is now an active member of the committee to design and raise the funds to construct a new pavilion for the bell. Stay tuned for more information soon on this front.

She is also working with the Manhattan Project National Historical Park to determine how the bell best contributes to the park initiative. She helped set up a display table at the recent Foundations public input meeting the Park Service held at the Oak Ridge High School. More on this relationship soon as well.

Shigeko is a true ambassador for peace and has helped as much or more than anyone I know when it comes to building lasting relationships between Japan and Oak Ridge and our nation as a whole. Her dedication to the very practical aspects of assistance to Japanese families in our country shows her insight. This insight into the practical has also led her to realize the value of sister city interactions which she has pursued with enormously positive results.

Shigeko Uppuluri is truly one of the jewels in Oak Ridge's crown.

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Oak Ridge symbol, the International Friendship Bell, as it awaits a new Peace Pavilion