

# Shigeko Uppuluri – a true Oak Ridge devotee

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column during the week of September 11, 2023)

Arriving in Oak Ridge in 1963, Shigeko and Ram Uppuluri along with their two-year old son, Ram Jr, Shigeko immediately became active in volunteering for such organizations as the Daniel Arthur Rehabilitation Center, the Young Women's Christian Association, and the Oak Ridge Garden Club. She would expand her involvement over the years to many other organizations such as Rotary, Children's Museum of Oak Ridge, and the Unitarian Universalist Church. She helped the Sister City Support Organization by assisting in the connection with Naka, Japan as a sister city for Oak Ridge.

There is much more that could be said and was said at her two memorials after her death at the age of 92. One of the memorials, the Celebration of Life was held at the Unitarian Universalist Church on August 5, 2023. The earlier one was held at the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell, a location that has become the Oak Ridge community's favorite gathering place.

The Friendship Bell is where my connection with Shigeko began and was the focus of our friendship for many years. I also have gotten to know her son, Ram, and count him a dear friend too. Shigeko has dedicated much time and energy in support of Oak Ridge over the years.

Shigeko was involved in the Sister City visits and would often ask me to come to the Bell and tell its history to the Japanese students. I would gladly do that. She would introduce me and let me talk about the history. I would say a few words and pause for her to interpret. She would speak much longer than I had, and we both knew what she was doing. She would tell them what I said, but she would also add details she knew they would find even more interesting than what I had said. I was fine with that, and she enjoyed doing it.

In 2016, in recognition of Shigeko's involvement to help initiate the Sister City program with Naka Japan, the Consul-General of Japan presented her with the The Foreign Minister's Commendation Award. This was done in recognition of her many contributions over the years to the friendship and understanding between Oak Ridge and Japan. She was an ambassador for Oak Ridge.

She also loved tending the iris flower bed that for years stood near the original Bell site. She was often at the Bell and we would enjoy talking about the importance of the Bell and how proud she was to have been able to recommend it along with her husband Ram. They had talked about something that would last thousands of years as an appropriate item for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Oak Ridge. Both thought the Bell was the perfect choice. Obviously, the Committee of 50 agreed.

Many of our conversations turned to the idea of peace and she stressed the importance of understanding the Bell's symbolism in that area. Shigeko was also proud of Susanna Harris, the designer of the panels on the bell.

Two large panels on the bell show the natural characteristics of both Tennessee and Japan including the official flowers, trees, and birds of both areas. Susanna chose the rainbows because of their symbolism as "covenants." She intended the promise of the rainbow to be a promise between two countries to never harm one another again, to live at peace with one another.

She extended the "promise" thought to include all human beings and thus the concept of international peace was illustrated by those two rainbows. The elements of sky, earth and living things embodies positive elements of life and were intended to bring thoughts of harmony and hope. The season of spring was chosen through the dogwood, iris and cherry blossoms as symbols of beauty and ever renewing hope of each new growing season.

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Susanna said in an e-mail when she was living in Australia and recalling the artistry of her design, "The surface imagery is meant to be reasonably transparent in meaning to both the Americans and the Japanese. I looked for symbols that had equivalents in eastern and western imagery and tried particularly to use things specific to Tennessee.

In Japanese art, cherry blossoms and irises are symbols of spring and renewal. A Tennessee equivalent of cherry blossoms is dogwood blossoms. In Japan, the crane stands for longevity. For the Tennessee panel, I used a mockingbird."

She continued, "Both backgrounds include mountainous landscapes: Mt. Fuji in Japan and the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee. The atom symbol refers to the atom bomb, of course, and to World War II – particularly to the mutual desire that no war, no such a drastic resolution to war, should ever happen again. The atom symbol also refers to the fact that the atom bomb changed the world forever."

She concluded, "And the rainbow, which appears on both sides, is a western symbol, representing the covenant, once again, that such a thing will never happen again. (Remember that after the flood, God shows the rainbow as a covenant that the world would never be flooded again).

Susanna was first approached about designing panels for the bell by Shigeko. She found the prospect of that project intriguing as she realized the significance of such a monument in the international city of Oak Ridge. She prepared her drawings and presented her design to the bell committee where it was well received.

With the help of material provided by Pat Postma in early 2008 I published a series of Historically Speaking columns on the history of the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell. They are available online at the following link:

<http://smithdray1.net/historicallyspeaking/archive.html> (All are in chronological order so scroll down to 2008 for these articles)

There are 11 articles on the history and eight articles on the discovery journey of Emily Mitchell as she wrestled with her heritage as an Oak Ridger and being from the location where the uranium for Little Boy was prepared for dropping the bomb on Hiroshima. She visited there and wrote a thesis for college on her trip. The Friendship Bell figured prominently in her search for meaning and she sent weekly articles about her journey.

The Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell has become an icon of Oak Ridge and Shigeko Uppuluri is inextricably connected with the Bell and its symbolism. Her memory will also connect to and relate to the Bell.

Yes, she was so much more than just the lady who along with her husband recommended the Bell. However, that one object, which will last for thousands of years (as they both desired and was central to their selection of such a bell,) will always to me be Shigeko's Bell.

We Oak Ridgers can ring that bell and know that once there was a small Japanese lady who helped bring such a strong and appropriate symbol to our city. I miss Shigeko already, and I love to ring the bell and think of her.

If you missed the Memorial for Shigeko held at the Oak Ridge Unitarian Universalist Church, it is available online here: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1YdTmEm811mrJ2lcZlnK7mWMkUakbR1WQ/view>

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Shigeko Uppuluri giving an interview for a TV program updating the status of the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell



Shigeko Uppuluri with her beloved Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell