

Oak Ridge sister cities: Naka-shi, Japan and Obninsk, Russia

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of July 29, 2024)

Jerry Luckmann provided the following history of the Oak Ridge Sister City Support Organization. Ram Uppuluri, son of Shikego Uppuluri, has recently accompanied a group visit to Naka-shi, Japan. I thought it was a timely subject as the program is again active now after the COVID years.

The Oak Ridge Sister City Support Organization (SCSO) was established by the Oak Ridge City Council to promote and foster international friendship and brotherhood throughout the world, and to assist the City of Oak Ridge in implementing sister city relationships with Naka-shi, Japan, and Obninsk, Russia. Oak Ridge is a member of Sister Cities International (SCI) organization which publicizes the motto "Peace Through People."

Oak Ridge's sister cities were chosen as the result of interactions with scientists at Oak Ridge National Laboratory and the Naka-shi Fusion research facility in Japan, and the Institute of Physics and Power Engineering (IPPE) in Obninsk, Russia. The exchange of scientists involved in fusion energy had created contacts with Oak Ridge researchers.

Like Oak Ridge, Obninsk was, until 1954, a closed and "secret" city where Soviet physicists worked on nuclear fusion. The sister city agreement with Naka-shi was signed by former Oak Ridge Mayor Roy Pruett and former Naka-shi Mayor Asakawa in 1990. The agreement with Obninsk was signed in 1991. In 1992 former Mayor Ed Nephew took a delegation to Obninsk to sign the sister city agreement there as well.

Oak Ridge residents, Shigeo Uppuluri and Carolina Ravina were influential in developing the sister city partnerships with Naka-shi and Obninsk respectively. These women sustained communications between the cities with able interpretation and translation.

Oak Ridge is a small city compared with Naka-shi (population 56,000) and Obninsk (population 110,000.) The Oak Ridge SCSO is a 501(c)(3) non-profit all-volunteer organization drawing support and funds from donations and local entities. In comparison, Naka-shi has a city department with city employees dedicated to implementing their international relationships.

Despite this discrepancy in size and funding, the SCSO has been able to facilitate exceptional programs.

The SCSO and volunteers have been recognized by Sister City International with several awards through the years. In 1998, SCSO received the award for Best Overall Program for a small city and Best Website. Oak Ridge was recognized with the Secret City International Arts and Culture award for the International Friendship Bell Peace Pavilion Project in 2019.

Volunteers, host families, local organizations and individuals have contributed thousands of dollars of "in kind" funding for SCSO projects. Host families not only open their homes to international guests but provide meals, transportation, event planning, act as tour guides and interpreters and pay for activities and entertainment. SCSO has been fortunate to receive significant Sister City International and Open World grant funds. SCSO appreciates the continuing support of the City of Oak Ridge and Oak Ridge schools for these international interactions.

The Open World grants, which were obtained by SCSO board members Tom Row and Ken Luckmann, addressed social issues including hunger relief, health care, opportunities for female entrepreneurs,

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substance abuse and education for the disabled. Russian delegations were hosted in Oak Ridge and visited a variety of local institutions and facilities which address these issues in the United States. These programs provided comparison standards and information about outstanding local recreational, medical, charitable, civic and rehabilitative models. All these activities addressed international issues shared by Oak Ridge's Sister City partners and offered methods to improve responses to these common problems.

Since 1991, SCSO has facilitated annual middle school student exchanges with Naka-shi, social exchanges with the Naka-shiWings for Women. In 2009, 16 women from Oak Ridge were hosted in Naka-shi and toured Japan.

There have been two visits from members of Japanese Girl Scout Troop 37, and Japanese troop leadership has announced plans to return with their younger girls in August, 2025.

During the COVID isolation, Oak Ridge and Naka-shi maintained their relationship with virtual meetings and pen pal exchanges among the students. In 2021, Naka-shi sent 1,000 handsewn masks for SCSO members, teachers, city officials and middle school students. On receipt of the masks, Jim Dodson, JMS art teacher and Oak Ridge city councilman, commented, "The friendship with the students, teachers and community leaders in Naka-shi truly transcends the barriers of a pandemic, and this gesture has renewed my faith that there are good people in our world. I am looking forward to the time when we can come together again through this wonderful program." Oak Ridge responded by sending Naka-shi a quilt created from t-shirts worn each year by exchange students for the 30th Anniversary of the SCSO. The masks and the quilt bore the inscription "Virus cannot break our friendship."

Exchanges with Obninsk included a youth soccer exchange in 1996. Ken Luckmann, organizer of the exchange, said, "We had a group of kids who formed a soccer team here and went to Obninsk to play soccer. Obninsk had its semi-professional soccer team, and it was way better than what we had here. Their teams are very, very good. And we had our match in their stadium. It ended in a politically correct 1 to 1 tie." When the Russian boys came to Oak Ridge, they were amazed at the availability and variety of store goods. Blue jeans and shoes were scarce in Russia at that time. Other exchanges were a project connecting the United Way of Anderson Co. with Obninsk and reciprocal visits with medical professionals. In 1996, the popular Knoxville radio station WIVK morning show hosts, Wilhite and Wall, traveled to broadcast "Great Day" live from a radio station in Obninsk. During the broadcast the pair aired a contest for listeners to earn \$100 by solving a clue. An Obninsk policeman came to the station to claim the prize.

In 2023, Oak Ridge City Council was set to approve a resolution dissolving the partnership with Obninsk due to Russia's military attack on Ukraine. This resolution met with resistance from Sister City proponents and Oak Ridge scientists who have had experiences with Russians at ORNL. The argument was made that "sister cities are people to people, it's not government to government."

Sean Seyfert, RMS art teacher and current Sister City Board Chairman, wrote a letter to Oak Ridge City Council. "Every one of us, at one time or another, has looked at our leaders and been ashamed by their actions and decisions. Sometimes, as a result, the world looks at us in ways that make us uncomfortable and has often looked down upon us for being American. They are unable to separate the people from the government. Let's not make that mistake in regards to the Russian people."

Sister City International sent a letter stating "our policy is to encourage our members and US communities to keep their sister city relationships especially now when the political issues and actions threaten to disrupt the positive, constructive relationships that have been made, over many years, at the people-to-people and community-to-community level."

As a result, the city council decided to soften the resolution. The sister city agreement between Oak Ridge and Obninsk would persist without city funding.

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In 2006, the SCSO hosted the Hiroshima Boys Choir which performed at several local venues. During this visit a journalist from a Canadian publication, The Walrus, wrote an interesting article about Oak Ridge and “ the meaning of performing in the birthplace of the bomb” that was dropped on Hiroshima, which can be found online at <http://thewalrus.ca/2006-09-field-notes/> This visit was an eye-opener for everyone, especially the host families that had small active Japanese boys who kept them awake all night!

The crown jewel of the Oak Ridge SCSO is the Naka-shi/Oak Ridge middle school exchange program. A cooperative effort among the SCSO, Oak Ridge city government and Oak Ridge schools, students and families from Oak Ridge and Naka-shi are engaged in a student exchange program that has developed cross-cultural friendships that might have seemed unimaginable three generations ago.

2025 will be the 35th anniversary of the Sister City relationship with Naka-shi. With the exception of two years compromised by H1N1 and SARS epidemics, and a 5-year hiatus for the COVID pandemic, the middle school exchanges have continued from the inception of the partnership. Each year a delegation of students from Robertsville and Jefferson Middle Schools visits Naka-shi in July, followed in August by a delegation from Naka-shi coming to Oak Ridge. In both cases the trips include homestays and visits to the host city's school and local attractions. For many years, in preparation for the trip, Oak Ridge students took lessons in Japanese language and customs from Oak Ridger Shigeko Uppuluri.

Robertsville Middle School teacher and 2017 exchange chaperone Julie Kinder McMillan described her exchange experience this way: “While in Naka, the American participants were busy with a daily schedule of cultural activities including weaving and dyeing, kanji calligraphy, ikebana (flower arranging), touring historic sites, traditional Japanese-style dining, and a formal tea ceremony.

The contingent visited a local elementary school and Naka-shi High School, where they interacted with Japanese students in a variety of English language activities. The group also spent part of one day in Tokyo, touring the famous Asakusa district of the city and getting a bird's-eye view of the one of the largest urban areas in the world from the observation deck of the Tokyo Skytree.

“The Japanese delegation was in Oak Ridge from August 21 to 28. The week kicked off with a welcome reception at the School Administration Building, and each middle school held an assembly to welcome the guests and share about the exchange program. During the week, the Japanese guests attended school and went on multiple excursions to area locations such as Market Square and the Sunsphere, The Great Smoky Mountains Heritage Center and Gatlinburg, ORNL, and the Oak Ridge mayor's office. A highlight of their stay was visit to the Friendship Bell of Oak Ridge. The farewell party was held at the Oak Ridge Country Club.”

While the trips are educational, the greatest benefit for the delegates is the cultural understanding and bond of friendship formed between them and the host families. During the visits, the delegates sometimes encounter exhibits related to the happenings of World War II, but as they stand side by side with their new friends, it becomes clear that this is a new day.

Ken Luckmann wrote in an annual SCSO report, “I'm sure the kids understand that at a period in history our countries were somewhat less than friendly towards each other, but the opportunity to stay with Japanese families, and the opportunities for the Japanese kids to spend time with American families, that's the key to the success here. These kids are making friends in a program whose motto is 'Peace through People'... It's a program that hopefully lets them take home the message that we're different but also the same in a lot of ways, and that the goal of everyone ought to be friendship and peace.”

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Yukari Kawamata was a middle school exchange student in 2002 and was hosted by Tina Luckmann, daughter of Ken and Jerry Luckmann. Like many students, Yukari returned to Oak Ridge in March of 2009 to renew friendships made during her exchange. She visited with the Luckmanns, Harvey and Nancy Gray, Shigeko Uppuluri and the del Castillos. While in Oak Ridge she participated in local Girl Scout activities and Naka-shiexchange planning sessions. Jerry Luckmann visited Yukari's Naka-shihome when she traveled to Japan in 2009. Yukari and her mom returned to the US and Oak Ridge several times. Yukari attended college in Seattle.

In 2023, when asked about the impact of the exchange on her life, Yukari wrote, "When I was a junior high school student, I applied for the sister city exchange program (2002). I wanted to learn English and the American culture, but I gained more than that by communicating with people in Oak Ridge. Their interest in Japan made me realize that how important it is to learn not only about their country but also about my country.

"Since then, I tried my best learning about my language, culture and history in addition to theirs so that we can understand each other more deeply. Luckily, when I was in college, I got a chance to go visit my host family again and we were able to get to know each other better. And surprisingly, now I have an American husband and live in the States.

"I can't thank them enough, the Oak Ridgers who changed my sense of value and perspectives, as well as my life. Hopefully this article will find you interested in joining this program and broaden your horizons."

During the past 30 years, the SCSO has facilitated the opportunity for international friendships with more than 700 Oak Ridge and regional participating families and organizations. Some of these organizations include Oak Ridge city and schools, Methodist Medical Center, Michael Dunn Center, Roane State Community College, Open World Leadership Center, Kiwanis, Rotary, United Way, First United Methodist Church, Tennessee School for the Deaf, University of Tennessee Knoxville, Emory Valley Center and countless host families and guest speakers, all of whom have participated in showcasing local resources for Russian and Japanese visitors.

On a personal level, hundreds of Oak Ridge students, families and individuals have developed relationships with their counterparts in Russia and Japan. These relationships have spanned generations with Oak Ridgers who have traveled to Naka-shi and Obninsk hosting family members that hosted their children and grandchildren. Many people who have traveled with SCSO groups have returned on their own to continue the friendships made during the exchanges. A deep personal understanding and respect for other people and cultures has developed. These long-lasting friendships truly fulfill the Sister City mission of "Peace through People."

Current members of the SCSO Board of Directors are Jefferson Middle School teacher John Smith (president); Robertsville Middle School art teacher Sean Seyfert (chairman); CDC teacher Lexie Scott (recording secretary); Rachel Seay (treasurer); Ken Luckmann (website and annual report); Oak Ridge Schools administrator Christopher Scott (school liaison); Ram Uppuluri (City of Oak Ridge liaison) and Jerralyn Luckmann (communication and publicity).

So you might ask: What is a sister city relationship? According to Sister Cities International, "A sister city, county, or state relationship is a broad-based, long-term partnership between two communities in two countries. A relationship is officially recognized after the highest elected or appointed official from both communities sign off on an agreement to become sister cities.

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A city may have any number of sister cities, with community involvement ranging from a half dozen to hundreds of volunteers. In addition to volunteers, sister city organizations can include representatives from nonprofits, municipal governments, the private sector, and other civic organizations. Each sister city organization is independent and pursues the activities and thematic areas that are important to them and their community including municipal, business, trade, educational, and cultural exchanges and projects with their sister city." — Source: <https://www.sistercities.org>

Thank you, Jerry, for that insightful history of one of Oak Ridge's proudest achievements.

I must tell you of my joy when Shegiko would ask me to meet the Japanese students at the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell. She would ask me to tell the history of the Bell. I would say a few sentences and allow her to interpret. She would speak much longer than it could possibly have taken to just interpret my comments. I knew what she was doing, she was telling the history in much more detail than I was able to because, you see, the Bell was her's and her husband, Ram's idea.

Shegiko was an amazing lady dedicated to Oak Ridge and such a tremendous example of a humble yet powerful person. I am pleased to see her son, Ram, getting involved in things in Oak Ridge such as this Sister City effort.



Girl Scouts from Oak Ridge and Naka-shi, Japan are pictured at the International Friendship Bell in 2006 (Courtesy of Jerry Luckmann)

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Shigeko Uppuluri, long-time Oak Ridger, taught classes in the Japanese language, culture and customs for students travelling to Naka-shi. Shigeko and her husband, Ram were instrumental in bringing the Friendship Bell to Oak Ridge from Japan (Courtesy of Jerry Luckmann)