

A Brief History of the Oak Ridge-Naka Sister City Exchange Program

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of August 3, 2026)

Ram Uppuluri, son of Ram and Shigeko Uppuluri provides us his insight into the history and evolution of the sister city exchange program between Oak Ridge and Naka, Japan. Ram has personal involvement in the program and has accompanied the Oak Ridge group to Japan. He also is very much aware of his mother's involvement over the years. Enjoy looking at the very important program from Ram's perspective.

In 1990, as the State of Tennessee and scientists at Oak Ridge National Laboratory were forging new partnerships in Japan, the City of Oak Ridge launched a remarkable initiative of its own. That year, Oak Ridge established a Sister City relationship with Naka, Japan, creating a lasting bridge of friendship, education, and cultural understanding between the two communities.

One of the most enduring features of the partnership has been the Sister City Exchange Program. Each year, ten middle school students from Robertsville and Jefferson Middle Schools have traveled to Naka-shi, where they live with Japanese host families, attend local schools, and experience everyday life in a culture very different from their own.

In return, Japanese students travel to Oak Ridge to experience life in East Tennessee with local host families. For many participants, the exchange has been one of the most memorable and formative experiences of their lives.

Today, some of the program's earliest participants on both the Japanese side and the Tennessee side have children of their own who are beginning to consider making the same journey.

The students are accompanied by two chaperones—one teacher from each of the middle schools—and usually a representative of the city government or of the community of Oak Ridge. This year, Oak Ridge Historian Ray Smith was our community representative, as well as making his first trip to Japan.

The Sister City Exchange Program has been an opportunity for many Oak Ridgers in and out of city government to visit Japan and to continue to build on the bonds of friendship that have developed between the State of Tennessee, East Tennessee, and Oak Ridge, and the people of Japan since the period of the 1980s and 1990s, when this relationship began.

It wasn't always this way.

In the late 70s and early 80s, tensions between the United States and Japan were high. There were concerns that Japanese companies were taking over important aspects of America: its jobs, its industries, its real estate. Tennessee's young governor at the time, Lamar Alexander, bucked the trend of stoking divisions between the two countries by creating and promoting a novel win-win solution: he invited the Japanese car manufacturing company Nissan to build and operate a manufacturing plant in Tennessee, creating jobs here and lessening tensions between the two countries.

Today, there are more than 200 Japanese-owned companies operating in Tennessee, employing more than 50,000 Tennesseans and accounting for more than \$21 billion in investment, according to the Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development.

Other states have adopted similar strategies, recruiting global car companies to build their cars in America, but Nissan, and Tennessee, were an early notable example.

The relationship between Japan and Tennessee is so strong the Japanese government decided to relocate its consulate general office from New Orleans to Nashville. The Consulate-General of Japan in Nashville officially opened in October 2008, assuming jurisdiction over Tennessee, Kentucky, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi.

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During this year's World Cup, the Japanese national team, which has qualified for every World Cup since 1998, housed its players in Nashville and practiced on Nashville's MLS soccer team's facilities. (Chattanooga's prestigious Baylor School hosted Spain's national team, energizing Chattanooga's support for Spain, which has reached the finals of the World Cup as of this writing!).

The [Knox Asian Festival](#), which is organized by Kumi Alderman, a great friend of Oak Ridge and supporter of Oak Ridge's Sister City Exchange Program, has been recognized as one of the best festivals in the southeastern United States, attracting as many as 75,000 visitors to World's Fair Park in August to celebrate the cultures and cuisines of the many Asian countries represented in the Knoxville area.

In Oak Ridge, the history of our relationship with Japan is certainly unique. The International Friendship Bell, a project that started two years after the Sister City Exchange Program was established, recognized the historic relationship born of war between Oak Ridge and Japan, but also the many scientific exchanges that had taken place between Oak Ridge and Japan in the years since the end of World War II.

One of the elements of the collaboration between Oak Ridge and Japan was around fusion energy research, and the center of fusion energy research in Japan was at the Japan Atomic Energy Research Institute in Tokai-mura, which is adjacent to Naka-machi. Oak Ridge scientist Larry Dresner and Blanche Dresner lived in Tokai for a while, and it was during that period of time in the late 1980s that conversations got started around the idea of establishing a sister city program between Oak Ridge and Naka.

The relationship was formalized by an agreement that was signed by the Oak Ridge mayor Roy Pruett and the Naka Mayor Asakawa in 1990.

My mother, Shigeko Uppuluri, a native of Japan, was instrumental in helping to set up the formal mechanisms recognizing the sister city relationship and facilitating relationships among people on both sides. I remember it as a time when the international aspect of Oak Ridge was celebrated and thought of as a strength, and many Oak Ridgers and Oak Ridge scientists were happy to support both the Sister City Exchange Program and International Friendship Bell project.

In my eyes, the two projects are intertwined and represent a lasting legacy of Oak Ridge: its sense of openness and adventure, the welcoming of others, curiosity about the outside world, and a willingness and capacity to act and to do things, and to make exciting and life-changing things happen in the lives of young people.

That's a legacy of the Oak Ridge Sister City Exchange Program that I'm very proud of, and I'm glad that Ray Smith got to experience the program for himself this year. I agree with him that the story of the Sister City Exchange Program is worthy of Historically Speaking.

Thank you, Ram Uppuluri, for giving us the history of this amazing exchange program between Oak Ridge and Naka, Japan.

Ram mentioned that I was able to experience the program this year. It was an amazing opportunity and I am thankful to the Oak Ridge City Council and the City Manager for allowing me to represent the City of Oak Ridge on the June 22-29, 2026, program. Jim Dodson first approached me about the possibility, and I readily agreed I would really like to do that.

What I agreed to was further defined as we approached the time for the trip and I was able to discuss the expectations with John Smith, Kelly Williams and Randy Hemann. The closer I got to the time to go, the better I understood what was going to happen. Yet, as I watched with amazement, what took place when we arrived in Japan was much more than I ever dreamed.

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We were met at the Tokyo airport and taken to Naka on a bus. When we arrived, we were welcomed by the families who would host the Oak Ridge middle school students. There was such a warm welcome and obvious excitement exhibited by the families that I felt our students were somewhat overwhelmed but glad to be treated so warmly and welcoming.

The next day was full of special tours and ceremonies. We began the day at the municipal building conference room and the office of the mayor. Again, warm welcomes and obvious joy at having us there. The mayor and his deputy gave us a tour of the office complex, and we made lots of photos.

Next, we toured the JT-60SA Tokamak fusion experiment facility in Naka at the National Institutes for Quantum Science and Technology which has the world's largest fusion plasma containment vessel that first produced a plasma in October 2023. This project is also affiliated with the ITER project in France which Oak Ridge National Laboratory has a lead managerial role for the US involvement. The three facilities represent a closely linked global network working to make commercial nuclear fusion a reality.

Imagine my excitement to be allowed to participate in a tour of this awesome record-setting fusion experiment. The presentation was informative and I captured photos of many of the images used to illustrate fusion energy research.

As is my usual practice when I travel, I made many photos and posted some of them to Facebook daily. On that day one of my friends commented my post saying, "Wouldn't you know Ray Smith would find the nuclear facility!" Haha, I was just along as a part of the group.

Then we attended a middle school class and were seated with the students as they were being taught. They demonstrated their ability to speak English and one student that I sat next to let me autograph his workbook and then several other students brought their workbooks as well.

But what amazed me the most was when we were leaving and were putting our shoes back on, this student had followed me and he approached me with a gift of a pencil he had made to look like a walking cane by adding something on the eraser end that formed the handle of the cane. I treasure that gift above all others!

Lunch was at a traditional restaurant where the table was very low allowing only sitting on the floor. Not something I did very well and wondered if I would be able to stand after being in that position. But I made it...

Our next stop was the school superintendent's office where I found a most memorable display honoring Shigeko Uppuluri. It showed the Friendship Bell and Iris flowers in bloom with a faint image of Shigeko's face in the background. I was glad to find that piece of special art on display "Remembering Shigeko Uppuluri."

We also experienced dying a small cloth and weaving a small table mat. I have my mat on the dresser in my bedroom now. Proud of that memory.

Later we had dinner, a ceremony, and entertainment by a very talented flute player. The mayor and others gave remarks about the sister city program, and I was able to make a brief talk about Oak Ridge and how proud we were to be a part of the sister city exchange program. Kelly Williams spoke about the school's part in the exchange. And finally, two of the students and one of the chaperones gave well received talks in Japanese. I admired them and the Japanese people really seemed to appreciate their efforts to use the language.

The rest of the week each student experienced the culture of Japan by living with host families and being a part of their daily lives. This is an important element of the experience that allows the students time to gain a good understanding of the Japanese way of life.

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While they experienced life with their host families, I took the opportunity to visit Mount Fuji, Kyoto, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. While I knew pretty much what to expect at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Kyoto was an exceptional experience of shrines, temples, and early history of Japan as it was the capital city for a long period of Japan's early history. Nagasaki also had a great museum focused on the early history of Japan as its seaport city. Those experiences gave me much appreciation for the Japanese culture.

So, I am glad to have been asked to represent the City of Oak Ridge in this magnificent exchange program! We will have some Japanese students visit Oak Ridge in a few weeks.



This picture was made at the first meeting of the sister city mayors in Oak Ridge - (l to r) Consul General Watanabe, Mayor Gooch, Mayor Massaki, and ORNL Director Stephen Strieffer, taken in August 2024
(Courtesy of Ram Uppuluri)

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This is the art remembering Shigeko Uppuluri that is in the School Superintendent's office. It was obvious that the Japanese people think highly of Shigeko and understand her important role in the Sister City Exchange Program. (Courtesy of Ray Smith)

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I am joined by Mayor Hikaru Massaki and Deputy Mayor Akira Tamagawa (Courtesy of Ray Smith)