

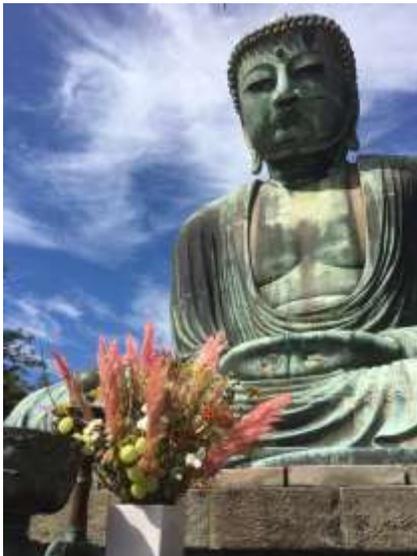


## Sister City Fall Delegation September 3-13, 2016

The fall sister city delegation that traveled to Tokyo and Hanamaki was made up of 15 members. There were Hot Springs area residents and a group of 9 representing ASMSA (Arkansas School for Math, Science and the Arts) – 5 faculty and administration and 4 students. The trip was enjoyable as well as productive. It was an opportunity for everyone to enjoy a wide variety of cultural experiences and for the students and ASMSA to enjoy educational exchange and solidify ties between our two cities as they signed a sister school agreement.



The first two nights in Japan were spent in Tokyo. The first evening some members of the group met Seichi Furukawa, the opera singer from Tokyo that visited Hot Springs several years ago. He would like to bring a small choir group that he works with in Hanamaki to Hot Springs for a performance of Kenji Miyazawa songs. Our first full day in Japan the entire group enjoyed a day trip to the historic city of Kamakura, home of the Great Buddha. That evening 4 of us met for dinner with Tomi Fujiyama, the country music star of the documentary film *Made in Japan* who visited Hot Springs last year for Documentary Film festival. The four of us had a very unique cultural experience; we visited a country music bar in Tokyo called Hee Haw. Yes, it was as original as it sounds! We enjoyed country music and eating popcorn with chop sticks right in the middle of Tokyo. Our friend Tomi would love to return to visit Hot Springs again someday. Both evenings in Tokyo the ASMSA students were able to enjoy Tokyo away from the adult group. Before departing Tokyo on Tuesday several members of the delegation made an early morning trip to the iconic fish market where they had sushi for breakfast.



Tuesday the group boarded the Shinkansen, better known as the “bullet train”, and headed toward Hanamaki. The journey through the Japanese countryside is beautiful with mountains and chartreuse rice fields flanking the track for most of the trip. Upon arrival in Hanamaki we went directly to a historic onsen to enjoy thermal baths. You can take a look at this beautiful bath house on their website [www.oosawaonsen.com](http://www.oosawaonsen.com). The rooms are all traditional Japanese with a tatami floor and futons are brought in for sleeping. The water at this onsen is amazing; it leaves your skin feeling as if it has lotion on it. This historic onsen is located on the banks of a rushing river with lush foliage. It is the perfect first

night in Hanamaki. That evening the group enjoyed an incredible traditional Japanese dinner wearing yukatas. The dinner was hosted by Rotarians and business leaders from Hanamaki.



Wednesday the group moved to another onsen hotel called Koyokan, one of the three hotels that make up the Hanamaki Onsen <http://www.hanamakionsen.co.jp>. The rooms there are western style and recently remodeled. Many tourists travel to this and other onsen hotels from all across Japan and Southeast Asia. The morning was spent visiting Hanamaki museums to learn more about the history and culture of the area. That afternoon we visited Hanamaki Higashi High school where the group participated in calligraphy with the high school students that will be traveling to Hot Springs this fall. Hanamaki Higashi, sister school of Lakeside, sends two groups of students each fall to visit Hot Springs. The final stop of the day was a visit to Mayor Ueada's office. Wednesday evening was the traditional formal dinner with the mayor and city leaders. The city of Hot Springs presented the mayor with a blown glass pumpkin by The Riley Brothers, Hot Springs artists.

The following morning 13 members of the delegation traveled to the UNESCO World Heritage Site Hurizumi and then on to Geibi Gorge for a boat ride down the Geibi river in a flat bottom wooden boat. Robert Zunick and I traveled to Ninohone, where Nanbu Bijin Sake Brewery is located. We met with brewery president, Kosuke Kuji to thank him for his support of the project to bring a sake brewery to Hot Springs. Robert has been working with Ben Bell, the young man who just completed a 2 year internship at Nanbu Bijin and has returned to Arkansas. Robert has been working with Ben to find a Hot Springs location for the brewery. The meeting went very well. Some topics covered:



- Kuji will own a small percentage of the Hot Springs brewery being built by Ben Bell in exchange for his ongoing support through training and advice.
- He suggested Arkansas rice might be exported to Japan for sake brewing and was willing to try a batch of sake using Arkansas rice. This would be a great step for Arkansas rice if it were able to be used by a brewery such as Nanbu Bijin. The sake could not be labeled Nihonshu because it was not made with Japanese rice, but he was willing to try it.
- Kuji invited Neal Jansen to visit Nanbu Bijin or meet with him while he was traveling to Osaka.
- Another very interesting idea Kuji brought up was to export Arkansas grown sake rice to Great Britain and breweries that are springing up in other countries. This could provide a valuable market for Arkansas sake rice.

- Ben Bell will include a rice mill as a part of his operation, so Arkansas grown rice could be milled in Hot Springs before being shipped across the country and abroad.
- Kuji, as well as Hanamaki International Exchange Association President Fumiaki Sasaki, are very supportive and excited about the progress being made to bring sake production to Hot Springs.
- Kuji will visit Hot Springs next summer to offer advice as Ben is progressing with the brewery.

Wednesday ended with a meal shared with members of the Hot Springs – Hanamaki Friendship group. This was the first time we have met together since the death of Yukio Kuzumaki, longtime friend and supporter of the sister city program. He is the gentleman who gifted the deer dance uniform and traveled to Hot Springs to update it. That evening the students shared a meal with their host families.

Friday morning began with a trip to a “Community House.” It is a community building built in traditional Japanese style where primarily retired members of the community meet to share and enjoy traditional Japanese crafts and traditions. The group was treated to a Japanese tea ceremony and able to do saki-ori weaving, a type of weaving using torn strips of kimono fabric. A group of 5 graders visited us while we were there and did a cheer for us in English.

The ASMSA – Hanamaki Kita High School sister school agreement signing ceremony was held Friday mid-day. The ceremony was held in the gymnasium, when our group entered the entire student body was standing, when we sat, they all sat in the floor perfectly spaced, at attention and sat silently throughout the entire ceremony. Leaders from both schools delivered speeches, as did Mayor Ueda, as a part of the signing ceremony. ASMSA presented HK with a beautiful copy of the agreement with drawings of both schools surrounding it that was painted by Hot Springs artist Alison Parsons. This is the first sister school agreement signing that has taken place during my tenure. The connection between these two schools is the result of the strong commitment and goals between the leadership of both schools. Plans for the two schools to participate in student exchange, with a focus on language, technology, and culture are integral parts of their pledge.



Both Friday and Saturday evenings the entire town of Hanamaki stops and comes together to celebrate the Hanamaki Festival – an event that dates back over 425 years. The festival includes a craft and food fair, traditional dancers, the largest parade of portable shrines in the world, and lighted floats. Members of our delegation were invited to participate by carrying lanterns, playing the tieko drums, and carrying the shrines. The festival is undoubtedly one of the highlights of the members of the group that travel to Hanamaki with each fall delegation. Before the Friday evening festival we were all dressing in yukatas, lightweight cotton kimonos that are traditionally worn to festival.



Saturday the group visited a museum dedicated to the history of the area, particularly the Hyachine Kagura dance which was designated by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural World Heritage. The group also enjoyed a visit to a local winery. A new item on the itinerary that had not been included before is a new tourist destination, a visit to a vineyard where you can pick and eat delicious grapes and then make and bake pizzas in a brick oven. This new activity is meant to bring tourists to the area to enjoy the unique activity. While we were there we met the owner as well as a representative from the Japanese government responsible for coordinating and marketing cultural and agricultural tourists' activities like the vineyard/homemade pizza experience.

We took part in the Hanamaki Festival Parade as well as the Ishiadoriya (a small neighboring town that is part of the City of Hanamaki) Festival to walk with the group promoting the National Sports Tournament that is held in a different prefecture (state) each year. The 2016 tournament is being hosted by the prefecture where Hanamaki is located with many of the events being held in Hanamaki.

The entire group departed Hanamaki on Sunday morning. The ASMSA delegation then traveled on to Osaka where they visited Tenoji High School, the school that has sent delegations to visit ASMSA for the past 6 years. While in Osaka the two schools made a formal commitment to each other to continue the relationship between the two schools and expand the content of their exchanges.

As is the case with every sister city group that I have had the privilege to travel with, the members leave Japan forever impacted by the incredible cultural experiences, beauty of the country, hospitality and most importantly friendship.

The 24-year relationship between Hot Springs and Hanamaki is a unique and vibrant part of the fabric that makes both our cities such great places to live and visit. More photos and videos of the trip are on Facebook on the Hot Springs Sister City Program, Hanamaki International Exchange Office, Arkansas School for Mathematics Sciences and the Arts, and Fumiaki Sasaki's pages.



