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The Red Brick Bulletin

Feature: Tracy and Memuro, the Bean Connection

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The Bean Connection

Picture this: cows grazing in pastures, rolling green hills, and slowly turning windmills. I almost felt as though I was back in Hokkaido as my sister and I drove into the town of Tracy, California. Back in the United States for the holiday season, I decided it would be a wonderful opportunity to visit Tracy, a sister city of Memuro, a small agricultural town in Hokkaido. On January 12th, I had the great pleasure to meet with Ken and Harriet Yasui, the people behind the Tracy-Memuro sister city relationship.

I met Ken and Harriet at a small bagel sandwich shop on the outskirts of town. They come to the sandwich shop every week, know everyone there by name, and by now they don't even need to place an order; it's already waiting for them! Ken is an energetic man with a charismatic smile who seemed like someone who is always eager to share.

Harriet is a sweet, kind, but firm woman (she insisted on buying our sandwiches.) We settled down with our food, but I was so enthralled by Ken and Harriet's story that I ended up eating in the car on the way home!

Although he is now retired, Ken used to be a prominent businessman who had many connections both in California and in Japan. His business? Beans! When he was asked by the mayor of Tracy to help find a sister city in Japan, it was the bean connection that led him to Memuro. Even after the sister city agreement was signed, Ken and Harriet have continued to be an integral part of the relationship. It's clear to me that they are not only well loved, but that they are also pillars of the community.

The sister city agreement, facilitated by Ken, was signed in 1989. Ken was drawn to Memuro

because of its similar size (at the time) as well as the similarity in agricultural products (beans, tomatoes, etc.) Since then, the two towns have exchanged culture, food, and even people. Delegations from Memuro came to attend the annual Bean Festival in Tracy, farmers came to study different farming techniques, and once a softball team from Memuro, the Memuro Bears, came to play! At the time Tracy didn't have a team, so they made one just for the occasion.

From the beginning the sister city association put an emphasis on youth exchange, and the two towns have welcomed junior high school students into their schools and homes. The students from Tracy take cultural classes before going, and while there they get to experience the life of a Japanese junior high student, taking classes, helping with English pronunciation, and engaging in club activities. Many of the youth that go on the trip have

Japanese heritage and see this as a great opportunity to reconnect.

Exchange is not limited to just students. Every few years a brave Tracy resident packs up and moves to Japan to teach English as an Assistant English Teacher (AET). All of the applicants are interviewed by Ken and Harriet, and it's clear they think of their AETs with extreme fondness. Josh Ullery, who is featured in this issue's "Hokkaido JET Spotlight," was one of these AETs. He loved Hokkaido so much that he has come back!

From beans and tomatoes to a vibrant and active youth exchange program, the sister city relationship between Tracy and Memuro is thriving. I was honored to get the chance to meet with Ken and Harriet. It is thanks to the passion and effort of these kind of people that international exchange and relationships can grow. I look forward to seeing how the program evolves in the future!

TRACY

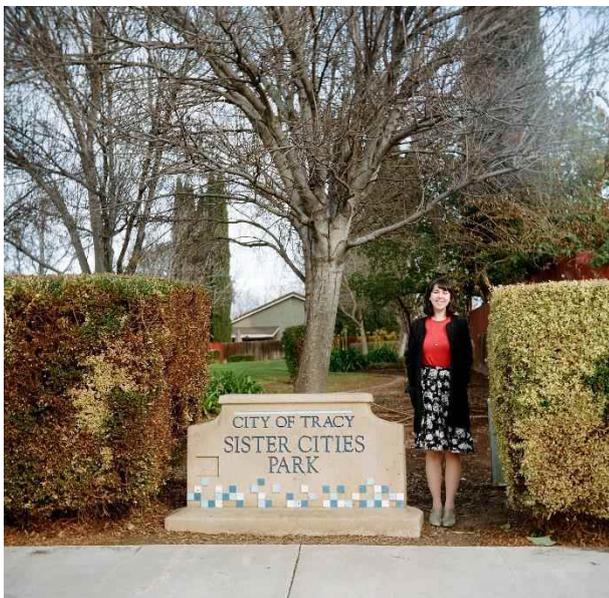
A city of around 80,000 people situated to the east of San Francisco. Now a bustling and growing city, moving away from agriculture. But, that was not always the case. Back in the 1980s, Tracy was a small agricultural town farming beans and tomatoes among other things.

MEMURO

A small agricultural town in Eastern Hokkaido with a population of just around 18,900 people. Hokkaido, especially the Eastern region, is known for its large fields and strength in farming. Memuro is no exception, boasting a long history of bean farming, along with other products.

For more information on the Sister City Association of Tracy, visit <http://www.tracysistercity.org/>

Special thanks to Cyndi Sandford and Josh Ullery for facilitating and setting up this interview!



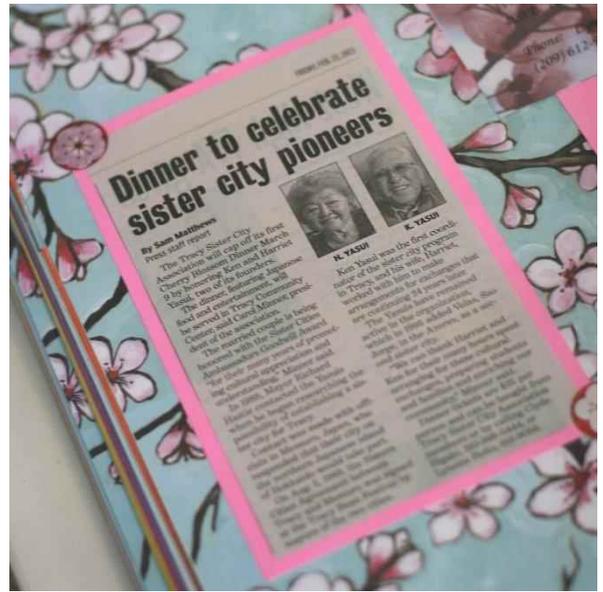
I paid a visit to the Sister Cities Park where exchange students take a picture every year.



Ken Yasui in his usual bagel sandwich shop.



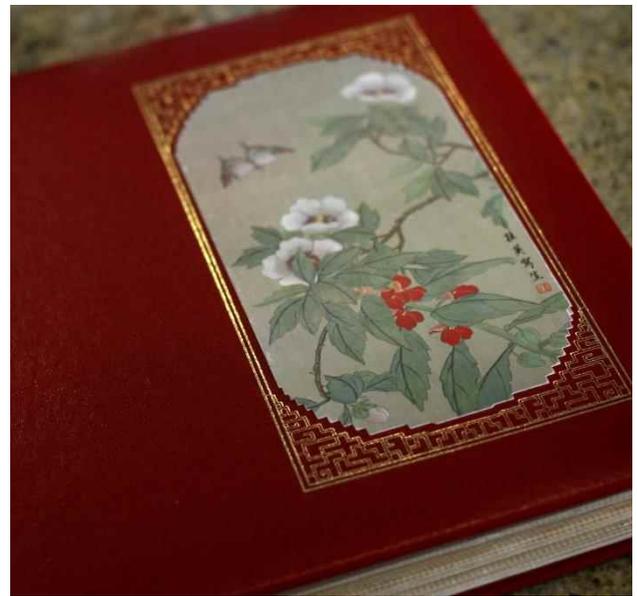
An official invitation to the Signing Ceremony of the Sister City Pact from 1989.



A newspaper article about a dinner held in honor of Ken and Harriet Yasui.



Cyndi Sandford, a current member of the Tracy Sister City Association who helped to arrange the interview.



A beautifully bound book full of photos, newspaper clippings, and letters involving the sister city relationship.



Memuro, Hokkaido in the summer. Photo provided by Josh Ullery.



Memuro, Hokkaido in the winter. Photo provided by Josh Ullery.



HOKKAIDO JET SPOTLIGHT



There are over 200 participants of the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme who call Hokkaido home. We come from all over the world and we all have a very unique experience with the island. In each edition of the Red Brick Bulletin, I will introduce a current JET living in Hokkaido. Each has their own story to tell – let's get to know them!



MEET JOSH ULLERY...



This is not your first time to Hokkaido, right? What brought you to Hokkaido in the first place, and what made you come back?

A That is correct. This is actually my second time living here in Hokkaido. Being born and raised in the Central Valley of California would who would have thought that I would get the opportunity to live and work in Hokkaido. The way that I got to come to this great island is through a Sister-City exchange program between Tracy, California and Memuro town in Tokachi. This unique program was looking for an ALT to come and represent Tracy and work for the town. I felt this was a once in a lifetime chance that would allow me to experience Japan just like all of the Japanese exchange students, that lived with us, had experienced the US.

I taught in Memuro 4 years then took a job in Toyokoro town in Tokachi for 5 years. During my time in Toyokoro I met my wife and in 2011 we left to take a special education teaching position in Nebraska. It had been 5 years since we left Hokkaido but I felt a desire to come back for my family and for my professional advancement. I have a 7 year old son (Willie) and a 3 year old daughter (Katie). They need to be able to speak both Japanese and English because communicating with family is very important.

Coming back to Hokkaido for me educationally is about 2 things. First, I have want to become a principal in the future and so I want to see how Japanese schools work because they do things that would help small school in rural areas succeed. The other reason that I came back is my desire to try and help improve the language learning of students in the Japanese school systems. I am hoping to use my experience to help the area teachers become the teachers of English that they can.

You've lived in two very different places now – what is your favorite thing about each place?

A I spent 9 years living in Tokachi and my favorite thing there was the close proximity to everything. During that time of my life I was younger and needed things to do. I joined a baseball team, basketball team, and a bowling league. But now that I am older I love living in Sarufutsu because of the serenity. I love just hanging out in town and not really doing anything except spending time with my family. I spend many a night just out practicing baseball with my son. There is nothing that is dragging me out or that I would rather do. Where else can you have 5 deer sitting right out your window? I LOVE IT!!

This is a very difficult question, but what has been your most memorable moment in Hokkaido?

A This is such a hard question. As I look at my life here I look at it in two areas: school life and personal. For me my most memorable moment in my school actually came with my teachers in Tokachi. Every summer the teachers have an All Hokkaido sports event. I had the honor to play with the Tokachi teachers many years and we actually finished 1st and 2nd back to back years. Being accepted by the teachers is an awesome feeling and is something that I will never forget.

For me personally in Memuro, the most memorable thing was receiving a yukata from former Yokozuna Onokuni. It was a yukata that all of his sumo students get to wear. That was a special honor. During my time in Toyokoro, my most memorable moment was on May 9, 2008. This was the day I married my wife of almost 9 years.

Josh and his family now live in Sarufutsu, where Josh works as an ALT for the JET Programme. He has settled in well to the community and has already become a leadership figure to many JETs in the area.

All issues of The Red Brick Bulletin can be accessed at http://pref.hokkaido.lg.jp/ss/tsk/akarenga_eng.htm

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