

Natsu Matsuri brings food, fun, and the fashion of Japan to Beaverton

By Maileen Hamto
The Asian Reporter

Sounds of taiko drums reverberated through the festival grounds. Under a tent, people found refuge from the 95° heat with colorful *kakigori*, Japanese shaved ice with syrup. Not far away, a line formed in front of the health screening van of the Portland Bentham Lions Club.

These were some of the scenes at the sixth annual *Natsu Matsuri* (Japanese summer festival) held last month in Beaverton. The event drew many spectators to Uwajimaya Plaza on one of the hottest weekends on record this year.

The heat did not keep the crowds away. Even exhibitors were unfazed by the rising temperatures. Kazuyo Ito, a resident of north Portland and a volunteer for en Taiko for a number of years, helped man the information booth at the event, tending to leaflets about recognizing the signs of heat stroke. Posted signs also admonished attendees to stay hydrated.

On her second year volunteering at *Natsu Matsuri*, Ito was focused on making sure people were having a great time. "This is one of the key events in the Japanese community to share our culture," she said. "I am glad to see so many community organizations and nonprofits represented here."

Among the area community groups at the festival was the Japan International Baptist Church. Mutsuko Wepsala was one of about 20 volunteers at the booth, which sold six pieces of *takoyaki* for only \$3. Church volunteers labored over the special pans to create the ball-shaped snacks with minced octopus and topped with *katsuobushi* shavings. A long line quickly formed as soon as the *takoyaki* became ready, and never died down.

Proceeds from *takoyaki* sales benefit the church's work for survivors of the earthquake in Nepal and Typhoon Haiyan (also known as Typhoon Yolanda) in the Philippines, said Wepsala, who staffed the cash box. A long-time member of the



HOT BUT HOPPING. *Natsu Matsuri*, a free family-friendly event celebrating Japanese culture, took place at Uwajimaya Plaza in Beaverton last month. The festival featured live Japanese music, martial arts (left photo), nonprofit organizations (right photo), traditional games, a mobile health-screening unit, and more. (AR Photos/Maileen Hamto)



church — more than 30 years — Wepsala was hopeful the *takoyaki* drew more people to the cause.

"With the church, I've done missions in Nepal, Japan, Argentina, and across the United States," Wepsala said. "There are a lot of people in need, especially when there is a natural disaster. This is how we help."

Food is always a big draw at cultural festivals, but so is fashion, especially when it is tied to an opportunity to snap a selfie. The Portland Kimono Club hosted a photo booth that gave people an opportunity to understand the cultural significance of the kimono and learn the proper way of wear as well as take a few vanity shots.

Volunteers Misao Sundahl and Kimiko Kotsugi were more than happy to answer questions and help people try on the *yukata*, a type of kimono typically worn during the summer months. The Portland Kimono Club was formed more than three years ago by a handful of local women. The group features regular meetups, classes, and other social events highlighting the art of kimono. The club has increased its membership by taking part in large

cultural gatherings, such as the Salem World Beat Festival and other events.

While many of the exhibitors and vendors hailed from the Portland metropolitan area, others travelled from further away. The Japanese Cultural Society, based in Salem, featured a table filled with a compendium of toys, stickers, stationery, and other knick-knacks for visitors of all ages to enjoy.

"We're here to serve as a connection between Japanese and non-Japanese people," said Kaoru Arai Lewman, one of the organizers. "We attend events like this to present the variety of Japanese cultural experiences. We have a good group of volunteers who perform Japanese drums

and dance, and present food culture, calligraphy, and art to the community."

The annual *Natsu Matsuri* at Uwajimaya is supported by a number of local Japanese-American organizations. It's no accident that many of the organizations showcasing their offerings at the festival are up-and-coming community groups and cultural clubs that benefit from the exposure. The volunteer-powered festival gathered people interested in community to give of their time, energy, and resources to local nonprofit groups.

"This is a great event for smaller and younger community groups to reach more people," said Ito. "*Natsu Matsuri* feels like family."



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