

Japanese, southern cultures blend in northeast Mississippi

By Danny McArthur

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TUPELO, Miss. (AP) — Mieko Kikuchi remembers what it was like coming to the United States from Japan.

Kikuchi, a Japanese liaison for Renasant and a member of Japan-America Society of Mississippi's board of directors, said she was an active member of her community when she lived in Japan, but she needed help from her friends when she moved to the U.S.

"Without their kindness, I couldn't have survived, not knowing the language, not knowing the culture," she said.

Renasant hired Kikuchi, a University of Mississippi graduate and aspiring southern belle, as their Japanese liaison following the 2007 announcement of Toyota's plans to construct a plant in Blue Springs. Much more than banking, her role is to help Japanese families adjust to their new southern lives, professionally and socially.

She acts as a bridge — one of increasing importance in the past decade — between the cultures of Northeast Mississippi and its growing Japanese community.

Building culture

Census data show Lee County's Asian population having increased by nearly 80% since 2010. In Union County, that growth is more than 150%, and in Lafayette, it's just under 70%. Much of that can be attributed to a surge in the Japanese community over the past decade.

In 2008, the University of Mississippi, alongside Japanese companies, established the North Mississippi Japanese Supplementary School. That same year, the Japan-America Society of Mississippi (JASMIS) created its North



Mississippi chapter.

Kumi Richardson serves as the Japanese liaison for BancorpSouth and, like Kikuchi, was hired in the wake of Toyota's arrival in the area. She said the arrival of a prominent Japanese company in Northeast Mississippi opened the doors to a community that likely wouldn't have come to the area otherwise.

"Because we are in the South, until now, we didn't have as many Japanese people as other states," Richardson said. "Like in California, there is a Japanese community, for example. But now we have a Japanese community here. That's a good thing."

For over a decade, Toyota Mississippi has tried to integrate Japanese culture into the local community, said Emily Lauder, vice president of administration for Toyota Mississippi. That started with supporting the local chapter of JASMIS and the Japanese Supplementary School. In 2013, they partnered with the Gumtree

Museum of Art to host Cultural Connections, which presented Japanese creators, art lectures and workshops, and an exhibit of Japanese art.

Since then, Toyota's contributions to Northeast Mississippi's Japanese community have been numerous: calligraphy classes, Japanese art programs, music, and partnering with organizations to offer cultural activities. They've donated \$55,000 to Japanese cultural programs so far, including the North Mississippi Cherry Blossom Festival, and Tupelo Public School District (TPSD) cultural awareness classes, and work to expose younger kids, especially under-resourced kids, to Japanese art and culture.

"Tupelo's becoming somewhat of a melting pot because of Toyota and because of the suppliers and other businesses and industries that are located here," said Emily Wilemon-Holland, corporate communications analyst at Toyota North America. "It's kind of just continued, and built, and it's growing."

Making the transition

A crescendo of cultural touchstones followed Toyota's arrival in Northeast Mississippi, including a strengthened Japanese involvement in the annual Celebration of Cultures; growth in cultural awareness in local schools; greater inclusion of Japanese art, music, and food in the region; the development of multicultural groups such as Cooking as a First Language; and increased presence as students at First Baptist Church of Tupelo's English as a Second Language (ESL) program.

For Toyota's Japanese staff, these events and programs are an important part of feeling accepted by the local community as well as connected to their cultural heritage. Many of the Japanese workers come to Blue Springs temporarily, typically two to three years, before returning to Japan.

Shoji Asai, whose position is group manager, paint, has been with Toyota Mississippi since February 2020. Originally from Nagoya, he joined Toyota 20 years ago and is enjoying life in Mississippi with his wife and three kids.

However, the initial transition was a struggle. Asai's family had just arrived in Northeast Mississippi when the growing pandemic forced schools to shut down. They didn't yet have a relationship with his children's school, and because his children couldn't speak English well, Asai

BLENDING CULTURES. This September 28, 2021 photo shows Kumi Richardson, Japanese liaison and premier banking specialist/personal banker at BancorpSouth in Tupelo, Mississippi. Since entering her role in 2008, she's watched as the Japanese community in Northeast Mississippi has developed and grown, and helped several families navigate their own adjustment to southern culture. (Thomas Wells/Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal via AP)

found himself playing the role of language teacher while also helping them with their lessons.

"Our English sessions are kind of fighting, honestly," Asai said with a laugh. "That was not so easy, but at that time, I'm using cartoons to teach English to the kids, through TV programs."

Asai got creative, using his third grade daughter's homework to help teach his sixth-grade son; using the science book, and Google translate, to help work on math, which was easy for his son, while focusing on sentences, which was harder for him.

"I tried to explain the mess. What is the sentence meaning, what is 'add,'" Asai joked. "But now they have good memory though, other than being challenging."

Shintaro Watanabe, manager for Toyota Tsusho, experienced a similar struggle when he moved to the U.S. as a teenager. As with Asai's family, Watanabe moved to the United States when his parents got jobs here.

Although Watanabe's parents eventually returned to Japan, he decided to stay. He attended college and eventually landed a career that led him to Mississippi in 2013. He met his wife, Ryoko Watanabe, Toyota Mississippi's HR business analyst, and now the couple are part of Toyota's permanent staff.

Like her husband, Ryoko Watanabe, who leads Toyota's efforts to increase awareness of Japanese culture within TPSD, has also lived in the U.S. for more than two decades. Before being hired by Toyota in 2015, she was a TPSD translator.

She sees her current role as helping teachers understand their Japanese students' adjustment to the U.S. During presentations, she shares the cultural differences between America and Japan, challenges during relocation adjustment, and how TPSD is creating opportunities for children.

"I am very thankful I got this opportunity because this is my passionate area, based on my own graduate and undergraduate research about how immigrants or temporary residents are impacted by the cultural adjustment and how their mental health is impacted," Watanabe said.

Remaining connected

Shino Sullivan was surprised that North Mississippi already had a Japanese Supplementary School when she moved to Oxford in 2011. Before that, Sullivan thought the usual destinations for coming to the United States were the big places: New York, Los Angeles, Chicago. Mississippi was unexpected.

"I didn't even know there was a Japanese community in Mississippi when I moved here," she said.

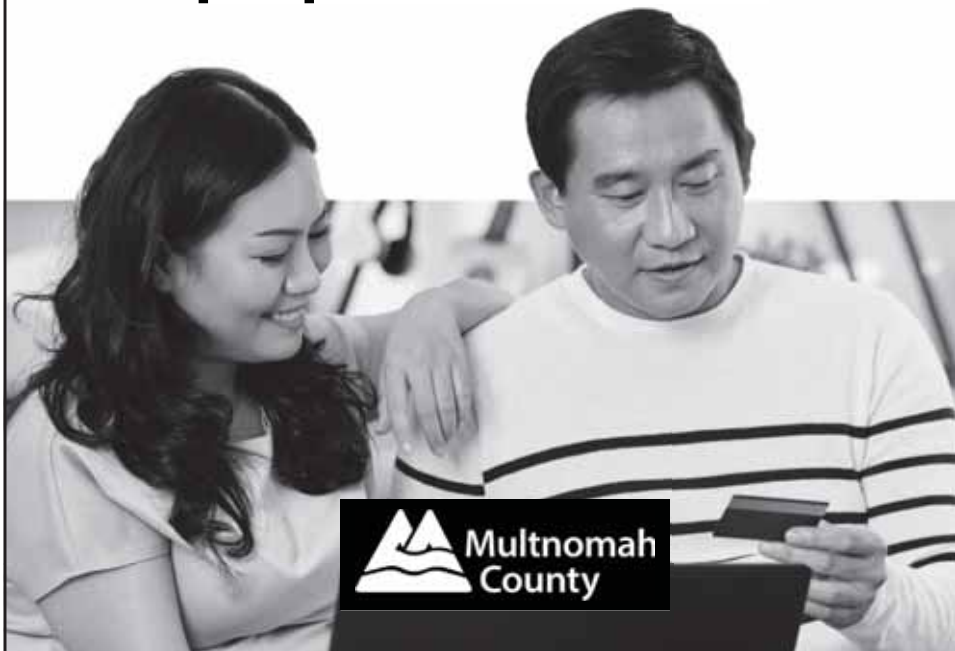
Now, Sullivan is director of UM's US-Japan Partnership Program, under which the supplementary school is offered.

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