



"Welcome to Lawrenceburg"

By Erika Schmidt Russell, News Editor

January 29, 2008



They are young movers and shakers of various political parties ready to make their mark on the world. They toured Ivy Tech Community College. They went to Argosy Casino & Hotel.

They aren't Hoosiers, though. They were a group of nine men and women from Japan, plus additional observers and translators bringing the total to 16 people, in the United States as part of a 42-year-old exchange program devoted to building relationships between American political leaders and their foreign counterparts.

With the group in Lawrenceburg was the youngest elected official in Japan, 28-year-old Yamato Aoyama, and a city councilwoman, Keiko Ogawa, whose district population is 689,000 about 100,000 fewer people than live in Indianapolis. The Nerima City Assembly of which Ogawa is a part of Tokyo.

The group arrived in Lawrenceburg shortly after 5 p.m. Friday, Jan. 18, and walked from the city building, 230 Walnut St., to Ivy Tech at the foot of Walnut Street next to the levee. Waiting at the college were Chancellor Jim Helms and Associate Academic Affairs Dean Mark Graver. Also at the

college were Dearborn Superior Court No. 1 Judge G. Michael Witte and his mother Joyce Witte.

Helms and Graver introduced themselves to the delegation, and introduced Judge Witte.

Witte told the group an abbreviated personal history of his Japanese-American heritage and when he was first judge at the age of 27.

Witte's story was enough for young Aoyama to gravitate to Witte and begin asking questions.

"I didn't learn as much as I spent a lot of my time imparting my knowledge to them, especially the young assemblyman," said Witte.

The exchange though appeared to be a good one. The visitors were very interested and fascinated by the local government structure and how effective local government can be. "They're coming from an environment where government is handled at a much larger level," said Witte, who had the impression the delegates were all from larger urban areas.

Takashi Imai, a Japanese government official and observer on the exchange, helped Aoyama ask questions of Witte in English, although Imai wasn't always with Aoyama.

That wasn't a problem, Witte had brought along his own interpreter, his mother.

"I think mom enjoyed it tremendously. I gave her an opportunity to be respected and revered as an elder in her own culture. She hasn't had regular interaction with her culture for 57 years," said Witte, noting his mother was born in the U.S. and has been in Dearborn County since 1951.

Seeing the respect the young Japanese visitors gave his mother was good. As modern cultures drift away from centuries old traditions, seeing young people paying "homage to an elder" is a reminder that not all the old ways are forgotten.

Both American society and Japanese society are changing rapidly, "I can't imagine a society without a television set, and my daughter can't imagine life without a laptop. But my parents' generation can still remember horse-drawn carriages from their childhood," said Witte.

But back to the questioning he received from some of the delegates. The visitors seemed to be more at ease with him because he is Japanese-American and had his mother who could translate. "I think they would have been more reserved if I hadn't been there," said Witte.

Cunningham agreed, and said Mrs. Witte was a hit with the delegation. Witte handled several questions about the U.S. Constitution versus state constitutions, and learned about the Japanese government system from Imai and Aoyama.

In Japan the national constitution is supreme.

Witte explained that the U.S. Constitution is a starting point for state governments, and states can be more restrictive in their constitutions. Imai and Aoyama also asked how old someone had to be before becoming a judge. Witte explained that a county or higher level judge has to be a lawyer first and usually someone is 24 or 25 when they graduate from law school, so yes he was young to be elected judge, but there is no minimum age.

Witte was answering Imai and Aoyama's questions as the group toured Ivy Tech. They saw a computer lab, nurses' practice lab complete with beds and hospital equipment, cafe area and exercise room.

The exercise room was popular, with the visitors trying out the equipment, and several asked questions about class sizes and cost of the school. Graver explained the largest classes have about 25 students, but the average is around 12.

Ivy Tech is a state supported school, but students do have to pay tuition, which is the lowest in the state, said Helms.

The group after their tour took the bus back to the city building for dinner and an exchange of gifts.

Back at city hall

Hoosier host DeeDee Benkie, Versailles and an ACYPL alumnae, gave a brief introduction at the city building.

Of course the delegation went to Indianapolis, but Benkie also wanted them to experience rural Indiana. So she brought them down Interstate 74 to tour the new Honda manufacturing plant, to Versailles her hometown, and Lawrenceburg.

"We want our friends from Japan to meet our friends in Lawrenceburg," said Benkie.

ACYPL Chief Operating Officer Quentin Lide said Benkie jumped at the chance to be the state host for this latest exchange. "She agreed even before she knew what delegation it was. When she found out they were Japanese, well that was perfect," because that is where she had gone, said Lide.

The delegation arrived Saturday, Jan. 12, spent several days in Washington, D.C. and were going to spend three days in Indiana, then were off to Tallahassee, Fla.

In times of global change and even at times of crisis, the programs of ACYPL foster greater understanding because the delegates get to see their counterparts in other countries as individuals, said Lide.

Following dinner the delegation exchanged gifts with the Lawrenceburg folks and were treated to Mayor Bill Cunningham's rendition of Jimmy Buffet's "Margaritaville."

Apparently, Cunningham's singing wasn't too bad, because the group was laughing and clapping.

Councilwoman Ogawa, 39, was one of those enjoying her Indiana tour. She liked the green space of Indiana, all the open land, she said. Ogawa, though, did not like the cold, but the "air is clean and I think that shows the peoples' hearts are clean. I like it very much."

She became a councilwoman when she was 31, after serving as the secretary to a Lower House member. The Lower House is equivalent to the House of Representatives, she explained.

"My own grandmother was ill, not sick, but she needed help. The welfare system wasn't very good," said Ogawa.

She ran for the council seat to help change the system and help her grandmother.

Being a woman in Japanese politics is difficult, and men in politics tend to be powerful, "but I'll be strong myself and take care of myself," said Ogawa, who asked several questions about Lawrenceburg's Clerk-Treasurer Jackie Stutz.

Ogawa liked the way Stutz managed the mayor and councilmen.

Cunningham enjoyed the delegation's visit, and hopes the delegation liked Lawrenceburg.

"I thought it was very interesting. There were a lot of highly educated people in the group, and I think it went well," he said.

"Will it benefit Lawrenceburg? I don't know. Will it benefit Indiana, I certainly hope so. It was good evening," said Cunningham.

Lide summed up the night just after the gift exchange. "This is called, in diplomatic circles, cocktail diplomacy. Everybody loosens up and gets to know one another."

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