OMAHA SISTER CITIES ASSOCIATION

NEWSLETTER

SPRING 2020

SHIZUOKA, JAPAN • BRAUNSCHWEIG, GERMANY • ŠIAULIAI, LITHUANIA • NAAS, IRELAND • XALAPA, MEXICO • YANTAI, CHINA

Greetings OSCA Members

It's hard to believe a year has passed since I last wrote this message. The Association has been very busy over the past year, with activity involving all our sister cities, along with the initiation of our new relationship with Isigny-Omaha Intercom. Thanks to all of those that have provided their time and talents to put together this newsletter documenting the highlights of the past year.



continued on page 2

What's Inside

2 French Connection – OSCA Enters Friendship Agreement with French Community

3 Gala, Flag Raising Ceremony Highlight French Trip

4 COVID-19 Cancels This Year's Global Gala

4 Japanese Ambience 2019

5 OSCA Mourns Kimi Takechi

6 2019 Gala Recap: Dignitaries, Kelly Speech Highlight 2019 Gala

6 An OSCA Small World Story

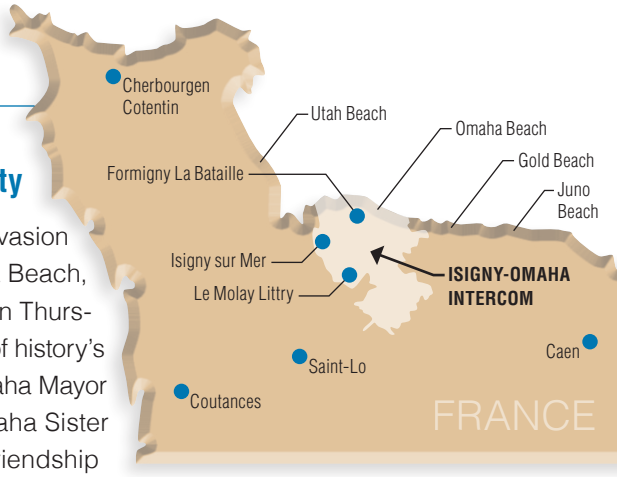
7 German Exchange Remains Strong

7 2020 OSCA General Council and Board of Directors

8 Shizuoka 55th Anniversary

French Connection

OSCA Enters into Friendship Agreement with French Community



Seventy-five years after the Allied invasion of German-occupied France at Omaha Beach, a new partnership has been formed. On Thursday, June 6, 2019, 75 years to the day of history's most famous amphibious invasion, Omaha Mayor Jean Stothert announced that the Omaha Sister Cities Association would enter into a friendship agreement with Isigny-Omaha Intercom, a community of 59 townships overlooking the historic landing beaches in Normandy.

This new partnership took tremendous diplomatic efforts from both sides, and it's worth exploring how and why it came about.

"Initiating a partnership struck us as very timely, given the 75th anniversary of D-Day, and very appropriate, given the historic and iconic tie that connects our city's name forever with Omaha Beach in Normandy," said OSCA Vice President Andrew Schilling, who was one of the Omaha representatives chiefly responsible for making this agreement happen.

Omaha took the first step by reaching out to its French counterparts. Quickly, they learned there was mutual interest. In March 2019, Omaha hosted a delegation of five Normandy mayors. They were received by Mayor Stothert at city hall on the same day Omaha was blitzed by eight inches of snow. Thankfully, the weather failed to dampen enthusiasm for exploring a friendship agreement.

continued on page 2



An Omaha delegation visited France in October 2019 to consummate the friendship agreement.

Greetings OSCA Members

continued from page 1

While I'm on that topic, I'd like to thank all of the people that volunteer to make this organization run. That includes families that welcome home-stay visitors, delegation participants, City Committee members, the Coordinating Council, and the Board of Directors and Officers. None of these people are paid for their contributions, but OSCA would simply not exist without them.

OSCA is also supported by local businesses and institutions. In addition to financial assistance, the Association benefits from services generously provided to help with administration, logistics, transportation, educational programs, events, design, and other needs as they are discovered. Please take a moment to look at our sponsors listed on the program and recognize their support of OSCA and its mission.

Finally, the essential support of government at all levels must be recognized. Governor Pete Ricketts has been a regular speaker at the Global Gala. Congressman Don Bacon spoke last year, and also met for two hours with the French delegation that visited Omaha last March. Douglas County Commissioner Marc Kraft is a long-time OSCA member, and his wife Joan serves as the Association historian. Omaha Mayor Jean Stothert, honorary chair of OSCA, regularly hosts visiting student groups and led the delegation of nearly 60 people to France this past October.

To all of our members, volunteers, corporate/institutional partners, and governmental officials involved in Sister Cities — THANK YOU!

John Hawkins
Outgoing OSCA President

French Connection

OSCA Enters into Friendship Agreement with French Community

continued from page 1





Omaha Mayor Jean Stothert actively helped to strengthen ties with our French counterparts.

Our friends in Normandy repaid the favor in April 2019 when a delegation from Omaha—which included representatives from OSCA, Alliance Francaise, and the Omaha Chamber of Commerce—traveled to France. The Omaha delegation was greeted warmly, and momentum continued to swell.

Besides the obvious D-Day connection, why France? Why now?

Those were questions that the Omaha delegation needed to answer. Ultimately, they found much common ground. Both sides were open to the possibility of student and university exchanges. Both sides prioritize tourism, in part as a way of helping the local economy. Other common economic interests include agriculture, medical research, and logistics. And, of course, there's food. That's right, the culinary arts, which France is widely known for. Omaha is a city that's inhabited proudly by foodies, and it boasts one of the nation's leading institutions, the Institute for the Culinary Arts at Metropolitan Community College. The more both communities explored the fit, the more boxes they were able to check.

This all begs the question: how is a friendship city different from a sister city? Simply put, a friendship city agreement is a less-formalized first step toward exploring the possibility of a sister city relationship in the future. Could Omaha and Isigny-Omaha Intercom one day become sister cities? The answer is yes. Is so, when? That's tough to say, but it could happen within a year. Time will tell, and therein lies one of the benefits of becoming friendship cities. It's a time for exploration.

As for Mayor Stothert, who called the agreement a "tremendous opportunity," she became a strong advocate for friendship status as she learned more about the common ground Omaha shares with Isigny-Omaha Intercom. "The Omaha Sister City Association brings the world to Omaha," she told the crowd outside city hall at the June 6 announcement. "Sister Cities International offers excellent platforms for developing cross-cultural relationships with citizens, arts and cultural organizations, educational institutions, and businesses."

On September 24, 2019, the Omaha City Council passed a resolution supporting the establishment of the friendship agreement, and in October an Omaha delegation of 64 that included Mayor Stothert traveled to France to formally sign the document to make the relationship official. The October visit was noteworthy for another reason: the heads of both delegations, Stothert and Anne Boissel, president of Isigny-Omaha Intercom, were women. Together, they posed for a photograph beside the 2004 abstract art installation "The Brave."

And together, both communities—both nations—took a first step toward a shared future.

Gala, Flag Raising Ceremony Highlight French Trip

Omaha Mayor Jean Stothert, honorary chair of the Omaha Sister Cities Association, led a delegation of 64 that visited Normandy, France, October 11-18 to formalize the friendship agreement between Omaha and Isigny-Omaha Intercom. The group arrived in Paris October 12 and traveled to Normandy two days later.

Stothert, who paid her own way to France, called Omaha Beach a "part of our country's past." Now, as the mayor indicated, the 59 townships that form Isigny-Omaha Intercom can be part of our future.

The trip to France included a signing ceremony and a flag-raising ceremony at the American cemetery at Colleville sur Mer. The group took part in wreath-laying ceremonies at the graves of Nebraska service members and the National Guard monument on Omaha Beach at Vierville. The night before the beachfront ceremony, the Omaha delegation attended a gala dinner hosted by French officials. A fly-over was planned, care of U.S. Air Force fighter aircraft in the European command. However, poor weather and low cloud cover forced a cancellation. That harkened back to D-Day itself, when poor visibility restricted much-needed air support from the Army Air Corps and the Royal Air Force (RAF).

The mood all week was warm, and not even a steady rain on Omaha Beach could ruin it. However, it did serve as a reminder. Former *Omaha World-Herald* columnist Michael Kelly noted in a follow-up story that the rain that day "felt appropriate," considering the stormy seas and blood-soaked beaches of June 6, 1944, known commonly as D-Day. Kelly's story also struck another historical note. It was General Dwight Eisenhower who served as supreme allied commander in Europe during that now-famous invasion. Twelve years after D-Day, it was President Eisenhower who created a People-to-People program as a way of fostering citizen diplomacy to avoid future bloody conflicts. What Eisenhower created evolved into Sister Cities International. And certainly what Eisenhower envisioned were more collaborations between nations like this one.





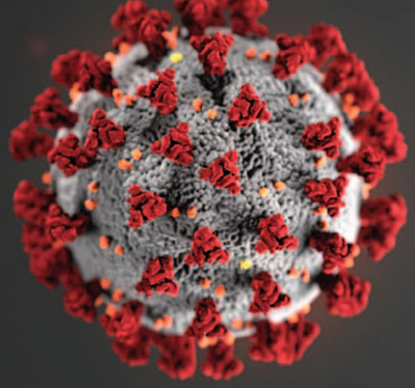


The Omaha delegation that visited France in October toured various French landmarks and helped honor key moments in history between the two nations.





COVID-19 Cancels This Year's Global Gala



At its March 2020 meeting, OSCA's board of directors unanimously agreed to put the health and safety of its members and guests first. That meant canceling the Global Gala, which had been scheduled for April 5, 2020, at Creighton University's Harper Center.

The OSCA Global Gala was not the only gathering to fall victim to the Coronavirus pandemic. Similar events—in Omaha and far beyond—were also canceled, due to social distancing recommendations and governmental guidelines regarding crowd size. On March 29, 2020, U.S. President Donald Trump instructed Americans to continue to stay home to slow the spread of the virus until at least April 30.

"OSCA wishes to thank all of the individuals and organizations that have contributed to the planning of this event, including the gala committee chaired by Maorong Jiang, Creighton University, keynote speaker Jeff Koterba, our sister cities, and Mayor Stothert and her office," read a note that was distributed to OSCA members March 17 by email.

Plans to conduct the business meeting portion of the gala remotely were already being discussed at the time of cancellation. OSCA members are encouraged to follow communications on the OSCA website or social media channels for more information.

Scenes From 2019 Japanese Ambience

This year Lauritzen Gardens will help OSCA celebrate 55 years of the Shizuoka-Omaha relationship. An exciting fall tradition born 15 years ago once again took place on October 5-6, 2019 with numerous activities for families and people eager to learn and enjoy Japanese culture. Performances included dynamic Kokyo Taiko drummers, UNO Friends of Japan's Soran Bushi dancers, Otagei (glow stick) dancers, and Koto and Japanese flute musicians. Both indoor and outdoor events drew crowds for a tea ceremony in Lauritzen's tea house, Sunpu Chaya (a gift from Omaha's sister city), Ikebana (Japanese flower arrangement), Martial Arts, Chrysanthemum show, Caligraphy, Origami paper folding, Japanese games for kids, Bonzai gardening, and more.

The new Consul-General of Japan from Chicago, Kenichi Okada, was an honored guest who joined this important OSCA annual event. While touring the art exhibits with the Honorary Consul of Japan in Nebraska, George Behringer, Consul-General Okada took note of a display by Vickie Schaepler about the new Japan Hall in Scottsbluff, Nebraska, which will house the history and contributions of Japanese Americans in Nebraska. The Consul-General oversees some 35,000 Japanese residents in the Midwest who are under his jurisdiction.

This coming October Shizuoka City hopes to send representatives for the 55th Anniversary celebration and join OSCA for part of the Japanese Ambience celebration at Lauritzen Gardens on Saturday, October 3. Many of the same crowd-pleasing activities will take place on that weekend for those of you who missed the event last year.

Scenes from the 2019 Japanese Ambience.



OSCA Sisters Meet Monthly

OSCA "sisters" continue their monthly outings at local restaurants to enjoy each other's company and share information. The outings are called Sisters Meet & Eat, and the attendance varies from 10-15 women. The idea for the monthly events came from the late Sue Mehaffey. After Sue's passing, the participants decided to continue the monthly meetings to honor Sue's memory and her passion for bringing people together. In January, the group spent the evening at the Metropolitan Community College Culinary Arts Bistro. In March the OSCA sisters visited Biaggi's Restaurant. Don't miss the next outing and be sure to suggest one of your favorite ethnic restaurants. For more information on the group, please send an e-mail to omahasistercities19@gmail.com.











Kimi Takechi, center, pictured with Kano Aono and son Steve Takechi.

OSCA Mourns the Passing of Kimi Takechi

The Omaha Sister Cities Association and its extended community was saddened by the death of Kimi Takechi on October 19, 2019—just 10 days shy of her 102nd birthday. Takechi passed away peacefully at the Josie Harper Hospice House and was survived by three children, five grandchildren, and two great grandchildren.

Born to Japanese immigrant parents in Pocatello, Idaho, Kimi and her husband Kazuo moved to Omaha after Kazuo accepted a sales job for Harry Wantanabe, the founder of Oriental Trading Company. In 1947, the couple opened a jewelry and gift shop in downtown Omaha. It would become a long-time Omaha landmark.

Over the years Kimi and Kazuo were strong supporters of cultural exchanges between the United States and Japan. Many times, those exchanges impacted the lives of students, businesspeople, and government leaders. Kimi was instrumental in establishing Omaha's first sister city relationship with Shizuoka, Japan, in 1965. In 2018, she was named among the "trailblazing women of Omaha" at an exhibit at the Durham Museum.

Dignitaries, Kelly Speech
Highlight 2019 Gala

For years, Omahans of all ages and backgrounds have read the work of now-retired *Omaha World-Herald* columnist Michael Kelly. At the 2019 Global Gala, those in attendance had the pleasure of hearing him speak in person. And what a speech he gave.

The 2019 Gala was held again on the campus of the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO). Numerous dignitaries were in attendance, including Nebraska Governor Pete Ricketts, Mayor Jean Stothert, and Congressman Don Bacon.

During his 48-year newspaper career in Omaha, keynote speaker Kelly covered police, courts, city and county government, and sports. And, sure enough, on more than one occasion he wrote about the Omaha Sister Cities Association. He shared one of those moments in his speech: it came during the 1990s when a World War II bomb group held a reunion in Omaha during the same week that Shizuoka, Japan, sent representatives to town to celebrate 30 years of a mutually beneficial sister city relationship.

In the course of researching that column, Kelly and a *World-Herald* librarian uncovered a decades-old aerial photograph of the 330th bomb group—including the plane the "City of Omaha"—carrying out a night incendiary attack on Shizuoka, Japan. Amazed at this coincidence, Kelly got in touch with both groups, the bomb group and the Shizuoka delegation, and focused his column around the progress both nations had made in the years since the war ended. War is hell, and it's in the past, Kelly explained. A better way can be charted through citizen diplomacy.

continued on page 8



German exchange students in Omaha visit various city landmarks, including the Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge.

German Exchange Remains Strong

It began 35 years ago, and it's still going strong. That says a lot about a cooperative effort between the German-American Society and the Omaha Sister Cities Association that allows for a student exchange.

Each June, a group of Omaha students visits Germany and spends three weeks immersed in German culture. The trip includes day trips, a school visit, and three days in Berlin (at no extra cost). Then each fall, usually in September or October, coordinator Carol Stoltenberg will host an information meeting for families interested in the upcoming exchange. Burke High School is the program's official partner school, but students from other schools throughout the Omaha area are recruited as participants.

"That is one of the advantages of our exchange," Stoltenberg said. "Our students get to know other kids who attend a variety of public and private schools in the area."

By the end of the year, Stoltenberg hopes to have recruited 14 participating students, who will commit to hosting a German student in Omaha for two weeks before Easter. Similar to the visits to Germany, the German students visiting Omaha will take day trips, including a two-day stint in Nebraska City.

The students pay only their air fare and a $75 fee to the German-American Society. Chaperones typically pay for their own expenses; sometimes they are partially reimbursed by the German American Partnership Program, an umbrella organization. Stoltenberg says she would gladly let any teachers who help recruit students accompany the group on a future trip. Neither students (age 15-19) nor chaperones are required to speak German.

An OSCA Small-World Story

In spring 2017, Lori Arias, OSCA Board member, signed her son Andres Arias (A.J.) up for the German American Society/OSCA trip to Braunschweig, Germany. After a series of pre-departure meetings with exchange coordinator Carol Stoltenberg, group leaders, parents, and high school students from different schools, the Arias family embarked on hosting a 15-year old student from Braunschweig. Marlon Gerke spent two weeks in Omaha touring our city and took an overnight trip to Nebraska City with his German and American friends. The Arias family also enjoyed learning more about Germany by taking Marlon on local excursions and to Kansas City's Worlds of Fun and the Country Club Plaza for barbecue.

AJ, who had no German language background, had his chance to learn about Braunschweig and Berlin in June when he left to stay with Marlon's family. AJ had a wonderful experience biking through the countryside with his host family and visiting other German cities.

The surprising outcome of this story is when A.J.'s dad from Costa Rica learned that Marlon was planning to study in his country when he turned 17. So, last May when the Arias family visited relatives in Costa Rica, they had the good fortune to have an awesome meeting with Marlon in San Jose. Marlon, two years older and now fluent in both English and Spanish, greatly impressed the Arias family with his cross-cultural sensitivity and personal growth through his study-abroad experiences.

As an extra bonus, since the two boys were not sharing photos of their experiences during the sister city exchange, Marlon's mother Gudrun and Lori started a now three-year long WhatsApp exchange of photos and greetings.



A.J. Arias and Marlon Gerke became fast friends over the course of their cultural exchanges.

2020 OSCA General Council

Coordinating Council Chair, Board of Directors ..... Pat Fitzgerald

Council Secretary ..... Traci Melanson

Special Events Chair ..... Margo Hathaway

Special Events Vice Chair ..... Aldona Tanner

Historian Chair ..... Joan Craft

Shizouka Chair ..... Ed McNamara
Shizouka Vice Chair ..... Yumeka Matsushita

Braunschweig Chair ..... Carol Stoltenberg
Braunschweig Vice Chair ..... David Hollrah
Braunschweig Vice Chair ..... Tiffany Zuerlein

Šiauliai Chair ..... Gediminas Murauskas
Šiauliai Vice Chair ..... Dalia Sudavicius

Naas Chair ..... Alice Sullivan
Naas Vice Chair ..... Bob Sullivan

Xalapa Chair ..... Jose Villegas
Xalapa Vice Chair ..... Marina Rosado

Yantai Acting Chair ..... Betty Chin

Friendship City

Isigny-Omaha Intercom, France Chair ..... Bernie Duhaime

2020 OSCA Board of Directors

Honorary Chair ..... Mayor Jean Stothert
President ..... John Hawkins
Vice-President ..... Andrew Schilling
Secretary ..... M. Pat Leuschen
Treasurer ..... Stephanie Connell
Coordinating Council Chair ..... Pat Fitzgerald
Legal Counsel ..... Steve Gerdes

Board Members

Lori Arias
Keith W. Backsen
Laura Castro de Cortes
Joe Chapuran
John Dechant
Agne Dizona
Matthew Henkes
Rob Hodson
Maorong Jiang
Celann LaGreca
Nellie Sudavicius MacCallum
Val McPherson
Khanh Nguyen
Gwen Olney
Kim Reiner
John Rebrovic
Judy Schweikart
Craig Stoffel
Andres Torres
Larry Uebner

OSCA
P.O. Box 241693
Omaha, NE 68124 USA

Dignitaries, Kelly Speech
Highlight 2019 Gala

continued from page 6

Kelly called the overlap of the bomb reunion and the Shizuoka visitors a "total, almost unbelievable coincidence." His column that week underscored the importance of sister cities. So did his gala address.

"Sister cities relationships, as we know, are not about sitting around campfires and singing Kumbaya," Kelly told the gala crowd. "It's okay to talk sometimes about differences. What results are bonds between people and communities and even nations, just as President Eisenhower envisioned.

"Out here in the middle of the country, I think, we can provide a model of strength, stability and unity. And through a great organization like Sister Cities, we can learn to see people we didn't previously know, not as 'the other.' Instead, we can begin to see ourselves in each other."

Omaha, Shizuoka
Make Plans to Celebrate 55 Years

2020 marks the 55th anniversary of the sister city relationship between Omaha and Shizuoka, Japan. The Omaha Sister Cities Association formed a planning committee to arrange for celebrations—subject, of course, to safe travels. The global pandemic has now postponed those plans until 2021.

Lauritzen Gardens has received a gift to fund additions to the Japanese Park at the Gardens, and the planning committee has invited a delegation from Shizuoka to join us at the earliest possible date. These additions include the installation of rock garden, a path around the replica of Mount Fuji, and new landscaping around the existing tea house. The City of Shizuoka intends to send gardeners to assist with the project.

The planning committee has also planned a Shizuoka trip and land tour of Japan. The Omaha delegation will visit Tokyo, Hiroshima, and Kyoto. Mayor Jean Stothert is planning to lead the delegation to Japan.