

COMMENTARY / JAPAN

COVID-19 brings sister cities closer together

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Have you ever met a group of people, either in an informal gathering or at a more official function, and greatly enjoyed the interaction with them so much you wanted to meet up again and spend more time with them?

That's the feeling I had when I participated as an observer in the Fourth U.S.-Japan Subnational Global Young Professionals Forum organized by the Koyamada International Foundation (KIF) Japan, KIF America, the Junior Chamber International (JCI) Japan and its subnational hosts from Omaha and Shizuoka in late January this year.

What made it all the more remarkable was that it was done entirely virtually between existing sister cities, and with the hosting and interpretation being seamless.

Thirty years ago, when I was serving as an Assistant English Teacher in the countryside of Hyogo Prefecture on the JET Program, our forward-looking head of the local board of education called me into his office around this time of the year to discuss creating a sister city in the United States. After much thought and study, I recommended three possible communities, urging one in particular. He was sold on it and later that year I traveled with him and several other educators to the town in California whose name matched the English translation of our "Naka-cho." You guessed it — Middletown. We felt an instant connection with that town and the relationship developed quickly afterwards.

This background is in part why I was so happy to observe the interactions facilitated by KIF Japan, KIF America and JCI Japan — I know the potential of sister cities and the importance of bonds between people who have a strong affection for their communities and wish to share their town's uniqueness and opportunities with others.

These are some of the reasons KIF Japan, KIF America and JCI Japan are hosting this series of forums — expanding on existing sister city relationships to include greater shared learning between entrepreneurs and possible commercial opportunities. Importantly, a final report will be written up on the six forums to be held between November 2020 and February 2021 with recommendations being submitted to the United States-Japan Conference on Cultural and Educational Interchange (CULCON) in Japan.

Japan and the United States share more sister city relationships with each other than with any other country. The 458 subnational partnerships between state/prefecture, city, ward, town, and villages represent more than one-fourth of all of Japan's sister city relationships.

Japan needs to be doing more on the sister city front and is missing opportunities to fully utilize its potential (as I argued in "Japan Needs a Sister City Strategy," *The Japan Times*, June 7, 2019), and am glad that the private sector, as seen through this series of bilateral forums, is stepping up to fill the gaps that exist in the government's

programs.

Maintaining sister city relationships can be difficult and the COVID-19 pandemic, which has greatly restricted international travel and normal work habits, has made it all the more challenging. This is why the online U.S.A.-Japan Subnational Global Young Professionals Forum is such a brilliant concept.

The idea originated from KIF's co-founder, the actor and philanthropist Shin Koyamada. Born and raised in Okayama Prefecture, Koyamada moved to Los Angeles at the age of 18 to pursue an acting career, a dream he had since middle school. Lacking funds and the support of his parents, and with no acting experience or understanding of English, he suffered more than most struggling actors but landed his first major movie role with two of the world's greatest actors, Ken Watanabe and Tom Cruise in the 2003 film, "The Last Samurai," playing the son (Nobutada) of Watanabe's character, Katsumoto, and young samurai who befriended Cruise's character (Algren). Subsequently, Koyamada became well known worldwide to kids and youth starring in the Disney Channel original movie, "Wendy Wu Homecoming Warrior."

Koyamada remained in Los Angeles pursuing his successful acting career. In 2005, he and his Columbian-born wife Nia Lyte formed a production company, Shinca Entertainment, and then in 2008, they established the Koyamada International Foundation, a non-governmental organization focusing on youth and women's empowerment around the world, providing humanitarian aid and disaster relief, reducing extreme poverty, promoting sustainable development and many other areas.

The Japan chapter of KIF Global was credited in response to the Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami in 2011. Since then, Koyamada began partnering more with governments, universities, and nonprofits, as well as with the U.S. Embassy and its consulates to promote bilateral relations, visiting Japan regularly. It was during one of his visits to Okinawa in 2013 that we first met, and I was immediately impressed. From 2017-2020, he served on the national board of Sister Cities International furthering his global networks in pursuit of "subnational diplomacy."

The following year, KIF Global and the JCI World Headquarters began partnering, and in 2019, they signed a formal memorandum of understanding to partner globally on youth leadership programs through their chapters around the world. In 2020, the Japan chapters of KIF Global and JCI discussed creating the aforementioned forum as a public-private partnership between subnational governments, business organizations and sister cities to help young professionals of both countries "deepen bilateral economic and cultural people-to-people cooperation."

To date, two-hour virtual forums have been held between the cities of Okayama and San Jose (Nov. 12), Kumamoto and San Antonio (Nov. 19), Hiroshima and Honolulu (Dec. 14), and Shizuoka and Omaha (Jan. 27). Two more are planned for later this month involving Birmingham and its sister cities of Maebashi and Hitachi. The work involved in preparing for them is no doubt immense, but so are the benefits.

One of the great ironies of the COVID-19 pandemic is that despite the reduction in in-person interaction, the opportunity to do face-to-face activities virtually has grown astronomically if one seizes the opportunity. Koyamada, using his network of friends, admirers, partners and colleagues, has done so brilliantly on behalf of his home country and the country he now calls home. In introducing a new way for sister cities to interact, Koyamada, his foundation, the partner organizations and supporting agencies have given a new meaning to subnational diplomacy.

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