

CURIOUS CAMPBELLTOWN PODCAST

The Koshigaya Sister City relationship

Andrew Allen

interviews

David Symonds and Onyx Holmes

24 APRIL 2024

AA Hello listeners welcome to a new year of Curious Campbelltown. This is our first one for the year, so I am quite excited about it.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the Campbelltown/Koshigaya Sister City Association. We have had several events and exhibits etc. to celebrate the anniversary and I know we have still more to come at our libraries, we have a fair few events lined up. Today I am very excited to be talking to two people closely associated with the Sister City relationship. So let me introduce David Symonds and Onyx Holmes to our Curious Campbelltown podcast, welcome guys.

DS Gooday

OH Thank you very much.

AA Before I start having a chat with both David and Onyx I want to give a little bit of background to the Sister City relationship. So if you can bear with me.

The first contact between Campbelltown and Koshigaya was between Greg Percival and Mayor Shimamura at an Australian-Japan community Sister City symposium held in Tokyo way back in April 1982. So that's how long it has been going for, 40 years. In November 1982 then Mayor Shimamura accompanied by Mr. Yoshida visited Campbelltown and participated in the Campbelltown City Festival of Fishers Ghost. In a Mayoral Minute dated 8 November 1983 the then Mayor Councilor Reagon recommended to Council the formation of a Sister Cities Committee to promote friendship, tourism, industrial, cultural and language exchanges between the two cities. A party of Koshigaya residents led by the then Mayor Shimamura visited Campbelltown in April 1984. At a formal ceremony the proclamation establishing the sister cities relationship was signed by Mayor Shimamura on behalf of Koshigaya and Councilor Bryce Reagan on behalf of Campbelltown. So that's just a little bit of the background on the relationship. So David let's start with you first.

How did you become involved?

DS Oh well that was easy. I attended the tenth anniversary celebrations in Koshigaya as a member of the Rotary Club of Campbelltown. The Rotary Club had a trip

across at the same time and we joined the celebrations. So then when I got back from Koshigaya I was just so overwhelmed by the hospitality and the generosity and the people that I was invited to join the association which I did gladly.

AA You became president. So you are a past president of the association. Tell me a little bit about what was involved, what you had to do.

DS The job was the easiest I guess because everybody under you did all the work. I was just a figurehead. We were basically a small committee. We arranged whatever needed to be arranged to develop I guess the cultural side of the exchange and also a big part at that time was the youth exchange. Prior to me being president we'd had exchanges of students that tended to be smaller groups with one exception. I was constantly being asked by a Rotarian in Koshigaya why don't we send more students. About that time Council came on board and helped to fund the exchange of students and then it took off from there. We started regularly having groups of 15 students going over to Koshigaya.

AA That's pretty good isn't it. I believe you were once an accountant. Have I got that right? Your involvement in the Association kind of can I say changed your life a little bit.

5 mins

DS Yes it certainly did. The trip to Japan I think was actually my first overseas trip in 1994. So yes that opened my eyes to what was out there and the Japanese cultural experience was so great. So different. I was sold.

AA Did you have much of an interest in Japan before? Was it somewhere that you thought of travelling to?

DS Not at all.

OH I can relate to that as well, I had no interests then. It was really strange for me. I think coz as a person that goes overseas you want to have that kind of background information, but I guess you can kind of relate to that. It was sort of a distance not kind of aware what to expect.

DS Well I was in my 40s and technically it was my first overseas trip. I'm surprised by what you've just said. I thought most students were interested in anime.

OH I've never watched any anime in my life. It's very weird a lot of people around me talk about it all the time. I think I've watched maybe one episode that one friend forced me to watch. I kind of gave up then.

AA So just because you like Japan doesn't mean you like anime. So Onyx you're a high school student who is part of the most recent student exchange and delegation at the end of 2023. So can you tell me a bit about your experience such as like the culture, are there differences?

OH So dating a whole way back the first time I heard of it was in a school newsletter and I read it in the newsletter a week before applications closed. It was a very split decision for me. I was just reading through it and then I read did like a

background information on what was happening and I was like this actually looks pretty cool. It sounds OK, it seemed a great experience and there was a lot of work to lead up to it. I'm like why not give it a go. So I filled out the application easy process it was nice and easy, got in, had a few different meetings and by the time I got to Japan I wasn't too certain of what I would think when I was there. But I think that kind of not knowing was the best part of it because I was able to learn so many new things, experiencing things I wasn't aware of beforehand and kind of see the difference. There is so many similarities in Japanese culture related to Australian culture like the way interacting with people but it's very different in how they do it compared to Australian culture. Japanese culture is very polite. We don't see that as much here in Campbelltown, there's not a very strong relationship with other people in Campbelltown.

DS Yeah but the Japanese can be crazy. Some of their television, the games they play the Iron Chef...

AA So you're saying that there are some similarities. What kind of similarities do we share?

OH I think kind of like I'm very focused on seeing how other people live. I'm very dedicated to learning the lives of other people and just the small things in life that make up an entire experience. So at mealtimes interaction with family - we were staying with a host family, so I felt that really, really close relationship with my host family while I was there. I have that same kind of connection with my family here and I was kind of seeing my own family in my host family. Which I thought was really nice, I really developed that relationship which was really cool and when I was there I also went to three different schools so we went to a preschool, a primary school and a junior high school and just seeing how their way of learning is same, same but different kind of thing. Their learning was the same things but in a very different way.

AA Did you have any doubts about it?

OH Not at all, nothing there was never any doubt for me. It's crazy to say. It's a fair question to ask. But I loved it, the whole process.

AA It was two weeks?

OH It was 12 nights, there was an open night flight. The flight was painful.

10 mins

AA It was during school holidays too wasn't it so it wasn't during school time.

OH No didn't miss out on any school time just study time or homework time that I missed out that little gap there but it was worth it.

AA So you knew pretty much straight away when you got off the plane that you had done the right thing. You felt comfortable when you arrived.

OH Like I said we had a few meetings beforehand so we got to know the people around us. I met David pretty early on and he was there for a couple of meetings

as well. The people that were with us, I had quite a few other people my age that I got along really well with. When we got there we had the itinerary we knew what we were doing. It was just more so being involved and being active in the task that we came up with.

AA There was a bit of a criteria wasn't there at the start, you had fit a bit of a criteria did you?

OH More so that we had a few little questions. We had to make sure we were capable of going overseas. That we weren't going to want to come home straight away. Coz' if you go over there and if you want to come home and be with your actual family straight off the bat then you're not going to get as much out of it, like you're not going to enjoy the experience. The criteria was more so what would do if someone else's homesick, what would you do if you are homesick. What if you actually get sick.

AA Do you like Japanese food? Was that one of them? I suppose it would have to be wouldn't it?

DS It does because we get the Japanese host family and they get really upset about the food and while they go out of their way to ensure that the food that they offer is acceptable, in a lot of cases it's very western, that can be expensive so what we try to do is try to make sure that the students are prepared to eat what they are offered. If they don't like it to say gracefully no that's fine I don't want any more or something like that. But certainly that's one of the things. Part of the orientation process certainly leading up to before Covid I'm not sure if we did it with this group is take the group to a typical Japanese restaurant so we can gauge how they are eating the food.

OH I didn't know you guys did that.

DS We went used to go down to Toshi's, you've seen the commercial. Now there gone. It was very good and it gave the students, this group because they were the first one after Covid we had to be strict and cut down the orientation program and we had to cut out a few things because certainly again because it was the first one after Covid we wanted to keep the costs down for the students.

AA I think what you were saying before about the Japanese wanting you to like their food and I think it's not only typical of Japanese but Asian culture I think too.

DS It's not so much that they necessarily want you to like their food but they want to make sure that you are comfortable that you're eating properly and that you're happy.

AA I believe you also to prepare a culturally relevant performance is that right? How did you go with that?

OH That was an experience in itself. Oh my gosh, we had a very long brainstorming process. We came up with so many different ideas of just to showcase our Australian culture. Because when we went there we had a Mayoral outbound and Mayoral inbound welcome so we had the Mayor and other Council

representatives with us and we just wanted to showcase what Australian culture is like and have that relationship between Australia and Japan. What we did we had a few different songs thrown out there, we wanted to learn a few dances. We also had a connection to Japanese as well so we did a song called the Tonton. It was a Japanese like a nursery rhyme kind of sing song sort of thing and that only went for less than ten minutes our performance.

15 mins

But we did that about five times when we were in Japan. It was good for us to get to know each other as well showcase our own talents. I was fairly good at the talking communicating aspect, even though I didn't know any Japanese at all just building that relationship as well while we were doing it I think was important. We also did like a little play, everyone had like an animal and we were jumping around like kangaroos or climbing trees like koalas which was rather adorable but it was pretty fun.

AA I think that would terrify me doing a performance actually.

OH Oh yeah it was terrifying. That's the point.

AA So what did Japanese students think of Australia?

OH A lot of people were asking if we are very outback. The stereotypical Australian - all driving a ute swimming at the beach all that fun stuff. Which is partially true but it's not quite like that.

DS Playing with your pet kangaroo in the backyard.

OH Backyard, yeah. We tried to have conversation. We had a few people that spoke pretty good Japanese so trying to have that connection between those like myself that can't quite talk Japanese but still gained an understanding of what other people think and then kind of have them ask questions as well. It was a very vital aspect and also trying to learn English with my host family. I had two kids with me and they were trying to learn English and they turned to me for help which was really nice. Because they learn English at school.

AA So with the Japanese language did you prepare much? Did you have much of an idea at all?

OH Part of the orientation program that David was coaching on was trying to (a) understand the culture and (b) learn the language. We had two adult leaders go with us and one of them is a Japanese teacher. So, she knew Japanese very well and part of our learning experience before going over there was kind of understanding key words, key terms such as please, thank you. We learnt our what they call Jikoshoukai which is the self-introduction. So if you are saying hi my name is and what I do that kind of thing. So we did have a few key Japanese terms but it was more so understanding what is important and what is not, what we need to use relevant to our experience, not stuff that we wouldn't use.

AA That makes sense. English is fairly widely used over there.

DS Pretty much it is part of their school program and most children can understand and speak reasonable by the time they go to high school.

AA So David your impressions of the Japanese people overall. I know you have talked about how polite they are and everything. Is there anything else typical about the Japanese that you noticed?

DS They are very friendly. I could be walking around town in Koshigaya and people would stop me all the time. I suspect a lot of that is because they would like to try their English. If they don't have any English they probably don't stop you. Certainly all the ones that stopped me had some sort of English so they were probably trying to use their skills and improve their skills. They are very friendly, very generous certainly the people we stayed with our host family. They were extremely generous what they do for you. You feel like a king when you are over there.

AA Onyx can you tell me a little bit more about the family that you stayed with? I know you said that they were similar to your family, so was it a large family?

20 mins

OH It was just the host parents so mid-forties and then the two kids who were in junior high school. It was just like a little apartment. There were only two bedrooms like an apartment you would have here in Campbelltown, but it was very family focused like knowing each other very well, knowing each other's timetables. We only had one car and the car was parked a five minute walk away from the house. That's not typical of Australian culture but you see that a lot in Japanese culture. My host father was a fire fighter and my host mother is a gym receptionist. They are kind of Australian jobs as well aren't they?

DS You mentioned it was a two bedroom apartment, so did you have a room by yourself.

OH I was in my own room but my room was my host sister's room and my host sister and parents were sleeping in the lounge room. They had like a little mattress set up it was like a little room separate from the lounge room.

DS A tatami room.

OH Yeah. My host siblings play Japanese hand ball a very popular sport in Japan as well. So a lot of the time they would be practicing just around the house passing the ball to each other. Which was pretty cool. On the weekend because we get to spend the weekend with our host family, I went to watch my host sister play a competitive hand ball game which you wouldn't see that in Australia but it was pretty cool.

AA So where they lived was typical of where I guess most Japanese would live in a fairly small unit or flat.

OH A lot of the other people that went with me were also in like a typical house but it was a very 50/50 split like a lot of people were in apartments or small unit block.

AA David, also in my research I believe that you had a Japanese corner in your home is that right?

DS Yes I do. I had to put all those gifts somewhere.

AA So you still have the corner?

DS Oh yes, it's part of the entryway. I must admit ever since that first trip to Japan I have never worn shoes with laces and I take off my shoes at the front door and walk in without shoes on.

AA It must have made an impression on you. I'm married to an Indonesian woman and it's custom for them to take their shoes off too. I've sort of had to do the same thing so I can relate to what you are saying. Onyx, I know you were only there for two weeks but did you get to see much else. Did you see much of Japan in that time?

OH Our itinerary was pretty packed. We had quite a lot planned. We never stayed in one spot all day. We were in two or three different places. When we flew in we went to Tokyo airport and we spent the day around there with the Imperial Palace pretty much just around Tokyo. We stayed in Koshigaya for a couple of days. But we did an overnight stay at Mount Fuji it wasn't directly next to it but we went round we had a look and we stayed with one other person in there, but I had my own room because we had an odd number of people so I was pretty lucky there. That was a good experience to relax just having a day away, a day of peace. I called home that day and I think that was the only time I called home the whole trip. We did see quite a bit of Japan, just little things like go for a stroll kind of thing which was pretty cool.

AA So how far out of Tokyo is Koshigaya?

OH About a 40 minute drive north give or take.

DS It's about 25kms to the edge of it. Between 25 and 30kms from Tokyo. It takes roughly an hour by train even though their trains are generally quite fast. So it's very similar to Campbelltown. That is probably the only similarity. They have three times the population in one fifth the area of Campbelltown. Good spot.

AA The trains would get pretty packed wouldn't they?

25 mins

DS Yes during the day. Only peak hour I would suspect. The times when I travelled on the trains I would say there were only one or two times that it's been really packed. Their trains are set up quite differently to ours because the seats are down the sides facing in and the rest is open for standing up and of course there always plenty of people standing up.

AA Did you visit Campbelltown Park?

- OH** Yes on one of the first days and we had very cute photo kid's photo there. We had our little mascot named Campbell he was a little wombat. We took him everywhere.
- DS** They were given the task of having at least one photograph of Campbell every day.
- AA** Just getting back to the relationship and a little bit about the history. I've heard it's one of the longer Sister City relationships in the country and I was surprised.
- DS** You're right it is but there are one's that are longer that are still going. From what I can gather and we consider it the most successful Sister City relationship currently. We've had activities obviously every year for 40 years and big activities and the fact almost from day one it was a community based committee whereas a lot of the Sister City relationships in New South Wales are Council run essentially. I could be completely wrong by that but that's my understanding and certainly we believe it's one of the most successful.
- AA** I thought it might have also been because the Japanese were fairly impressed or touched you could say with what we did as far as setting up the park, the Japanese gardens and the tea house. We kind of made a good impression on them and maybe that's why...
- DS** It's possible but I would suggest that every Council that has a Sister City relationship more than likely has a park dedicated to their Sister City. The tea house that we have of course was a gift by Koshigaya to us. They sent all the materials and the workers out for two months as part of the bicentenary and it may well be purely because Australia was having a bicentenary that we got such a great gift. Of course, we then in response we gifted to Koshigaya some Australian animals which cost us nothing. We got them over there virtually for nothing and then Koshigaya costs started to accrue because first of all they had to build a two million dollar aviary to house them and then I think it cost them about thirty thousand dollars to get the birds from the airport out to the aviary once they arrived. But no look it's been great. They really have gone beyond what would be normal to this relationship. What we thought was good giving them some birds cost them a fortune.
- AA** It's a great thing. In the early days the Council tried to have a relationship with a place in France and Scotland but the earlier attempts didn't quite work out. Earlier attempts...
- DS** I don't know a lot about that but certainly the one with Scotland I think Greg Percival was visiting Scotland and visited Campbeltown in Scotland it may have been as a Rotarian at that time. I do have some photos of that trip that he made and I would suggest that was most probably where it was tried to be established but I'm not aware that it ever went anywhere.
- AA** So the recent delegation that came from Japan for a visit, I know David you were involved with that. How did that go, were they impressed with what they saw?

30 mins

DS Oh yeah very much so. It was a very small delegation which I thought was interesting. Again there were effectively two groups because there was a Council group consisting of the Mayor, the Vice Mayor, the Chairman of the City Assembly and a couple of staffers. Then there was a Sister City group from the Koshigaya International Association. We looked after them and the Council looked after the Councilors and that is understandable. The only function we had when we were together was the actual resigning ceremony. They loved it. They were spoilt. They were annoyed that they didn't have more free time.

OH They were only here for a couple of days.

DS Then of course the following weekend I had another group from Koshigaya that included Mr Nakajima who was on the original trip back in 1984 and part of that initial signing agreement. He was on a private trip with two of his staff and there must have been another three or four construction company owners. Mr Nakajima owns a big construction company in Koshigaya and the others were on a study tour of Australia. Of course being in Australia they had to come to Campbelltown. They were very impressed too.

AA Excellent, that's great. Do you have plans of going back to Japan, David?

DS Yes, I'm going there in one month. Of course the Sister City celebrations are reciprocal. They were here last two weeks and we are going back as a reciprocal leg in early June. Interestingly and I'm not quite sure why but Council are going about a week or two before us and then we are going after them. There are ten members of the Sister City Association on that delegation.

AA What about you Onyx are you planning to go back one day?

OH I'm in Year 11 at the moment so once I finish school I'm aiming to take a gap year, so in that gap year I want my first stop to be Japan go back and see my host family and spend at least a couple of weeks back in Japan. Until I go wherever I go beyond that but I definitely want to go back to Japan at least once.

AA Do you do much promotion of the student exchange? Do you talk to other students and recommend doing it?

OH Applications are open at the moment for the next exchange and I am working with my school quite a bit to promote it. I'm also with the Youth Action Team of Campbelltown Council so we're trying to have a few different initiatives involved between Council and the exchange to kind of promote it as well which will be pretty nice.

AA Well I think it's a great thing the Sister City relationship. I think Campbelltown has benefitted and it sounds like Japan has benefitted from it as well. I have enjoyed talking to you both today and I've learnt a bit and I have really enjoyed our chat. Thank you for being part of Curious Campbelltown.

DS Thank you.

OH Thank You very much

