

# Exceptional Faculty Award spotlight: The cultural ambassador



Professor Michiyo Okuhara helps members of the Japanese Club teach children in Clark's Child & Family Studies program about kimono in advance of the 2014 Sakura Festival.

Professor Michiyo Okuhara is well aware that students who enroll in her Japanese courses probably have a limited understanding of her home country's culture.

"They see it in pop culture—*anime*, *manga*, Hello Kitty—or sometimes traditional things like samurai," she says. "In class we don't focus on animation or comic books. We try to inspire them to learn the language, but also a more complete sense of Japanese culture."

Ironically, for someone who now teaches Japanese, Okuhara originally came to the United States to learn English. “I studied English in Japan, but I wanted to use it and live it,” she explains. She earned her master’s degree at Portland State University, also getting a certificate to teach Japanese as a foreign language from that institution, and in 1999 began teaching at Clark.

“At the time, the program was very small,” she remembers. “I had four classes a year, just Japanese 101 to 103.”

Today, thanks largely to Okuhara’s efforts, Clark offers two years of Japanese study. The college’s Japanese Club, which Okuhara helped found, is a vibrant and visible presence on the main campus. Okuhara has also been a key organizer of the



college’s annual Sakura Festival, and has helped incorporate children from the college’s Child and Family Studies (CFS) program into the event—something she started after her own son, Anthony, graduated from the program’s daycare. (Okuhara’s daughter, Sakura, also has a Clark connection, having earned her associate here before transferring to Western Washington University.)

Okuhara, who received tenure in 2013, says she appreciates the partnerships she’s been able to develop at Clark. “We have great colleagues, great collaboration,” she says. “Like with CFS, and also International Programs are a great support for us. Or when we had a Japanese theater troupe visiting and needed a performance space; [drama professor] Gene Biby offered to let us use his stage. We’re a small department, but with other people’s help, we can do things we cannot do alone.”

This year, Okuhara received 2014-2015 Exceptional Faculty

Award. “This instructor goes above and beyond, helping students outside of class and outside of her office hours,” wrote one student in her nomination. “She not only teaches the language, but she puts forth an extra energy to relate our lessons to Japanese culture. Her knowledge is not only shared to the class, but to the Clark community as well.”

Many of Okuhara’s former students return during Sakura to visit “Okuhara-sensei,” as they call her. Others write her from Japan to tell her about working there. Okuhara cherishes those stories, but feels that teaching world languages helps students even if they never leave their hometown.

“Not everyone gets to major in Japanese or work in Japan,” she says. “But part of what they learn is empathy for other cultures, and maybe patience with people from other countries who don’t speak English. I really enjoy seeing students learn. When they say Japanese is fun—that’s what I hope for.”

Learn about other recipients of the 2014-2015 Exceptional Faculty Awards.

*Photos: Clark College/Jenny Shadley*

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## **The Roots of Friendship Grow Stronger**





The Women's Ensemble gets ready to perform at the 2015 Clark College Sakura Festival.



John Kageyama, *far left*, presented a check to the Clark College Foundation in the names of the Clark College Facilities Services staff in honor of their work to keep his shirofugen

cherry trees thriving.

On an unseasonably warm April day, John Kageyama, president of America Kotobuki Electronics, stood on Clark College's main campus below one of the 100 shirofugen cherry trees he had donated to the City of Vancouver 25 years earlier. After a quarter-century, those trees had grown from fragile saplings to stately landmarks whose blossoms fell to the ground like pale pink snow.

"Thank you for taking such good care of these sakura," Kageyama said to the crowd assembled to celebrate the college's annual Sakura Festival on April 16. He noted that shirofugen trees require careful maintenance to flourish. "I never expected the trees to be so beautiful and so big."

This year's event marked not only the 25th anniversary of the trees' planting on Clark's campus, but also the 10th anniversary of the festival itself, which is held by the college in partnership with the City of Vancouver and the Vancouver Rotary Club.



Korbin Hair, 5, stands atop a rock in the Japanese Friendship Garden during the 2015 Sakura Festival while his parents, Michael and Judy, stand nearby.

“Each year as these trees blossom, they signal new hopes, new beginnings, and the joyful arrival of spring,” said President Robert K. Knight during his opening remarks. “At the same time, because their blooming season is so brief—only about two weeks—they remind us to enjoy each day and to live life to the fullest.”

The trees are also a symbol of international friendship, and their blossoming has become occasion to celebrate the 20-year sister-city relationship between Vancouver and Joyo, Japan. Many guests were on hand to celebrate that relationship, including Portland Consul General for Japan Hiroshi Furusawa, Vancouver City Councilmembers Alisha Topper and Larry Smith, SEH America Inc. Executive Vice President Tatsuo Ito, Vancouver City Manager Eric Homes, former Vancouver mayor Bruce Hagensen, former Vancouver City Manager Pat McDonnell, and Clark College Trustees Jack Burkman, Royce Pollard, and Rekah Strong.

“We Japanese have had a special affinity for sakura for more than 10 centuries,” said Consul General Furusawa. “Thank you for your warm friendship and strong stewardship of these trees.”

Indeed, Kageyama ended his own remarks by announcing a donation of \$1,000 to the Clark College Foundation in the names of the college’s Facilities Services staff members as a way to thank them for their work keeping the trees healthy. He also announced a donation to the Dr. Chihiro I Kanagawa Scholarship, which allows one student from Japan to study at Clark each year.



“Taking political science classes here has given me the opportunity to form my own ideas about Japanese politics,” said Dr. Kanagawa Scholarship recipient Erina Yamazaki during the 2015 Sakura Festival.

Clad in a traditional formal kimono, this year’s scholarship recipient, Erina Yamazaki, spoke movingly about her experiences both at Clark and in her home province of Fukushima. That region of Japan was devastated in 2011 by a tsunami and resulting nuclear power plant failure. While Yamazaki’s home was not affected by the disaster, she remembered it as a “traumatic event” that nevertheless strengthened her faith in international friendship.

“I saw many countries and companies from around the world donated food and money to Japan,” she said. “The feeling that we are supported by so many people from all over the world gives us the motivation to start new things.”

The opening ceremony included performances by flautist LeeAnn McKenna and Yukiko Vossen on the *koto*, a traditional Japanese stringed instrument, as well as by the Clark College Women’s Ensemble.





Children from Clark's Child & Family Studies program show off their sakura-themed artwork during the 2015 Sakura Festival.

Afterward, entertainment included a traditional dance performance by the Clark College Japanese Club, a drum performance by Portland Taiko, and a presentation of sakura-themed art by children from Clark's Child & Family Studies program. The family-friendly event included lots of free activities and cookies from the Clark College Bakery.

Tax accountant Michael Hair was taking a well-deserved break with his family at the festival after the end of tax season. His elder son, Alex, 9, had the day off from school anyway, and he and Michael were carefully folding origami paper into cranes and frogs. Michael's wife, Judy, and younger son, Korbin, 5, sat a few tables away watching the taiko drummers perform.





Members of Portland Taiko  
Drum perform during the 2015  
Sakura Festival.

Michael Hair began taking Japanese classes at Clark last year. "I've always enjoyed other cultures," he said. "It's a full life going to school, going to work, and taking care of a family. But I read something a while back that really stuck with me. It basically said, if there's something you've always wanted to do, go do it; don't wait. So I came here and I actually really enjoy the classes."

Meanwhile, Alex was dancing to the taiko drums in his chair, clearly a fan of the festival. "My favorites are the drums and the origami," he said. "I like the way the drums make me feel like someone's beating on my heart. And I like the origami because it helps me calm down again after the drums."

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## **Sakura is Coming**



One of 100 shirofugen cherry trees on Clark's main campus blossoming near the Royce E. Pollard Japanese Friendship Garden, where (weather permitting) the opening remarks for this year's Sakura Festival will be held.

On Thursday, April 16, Clark College's 2015 Sakura Festival will honor the historic ties of friendship between the cities of Vancouver, Washington, and Joyo, Japan. This year's celebration holds particular significance, as it recognizes several important milestones: the 25th anniversary of the donation by Mr. John Kageyama of the 100 shirofugen cherry trees whose blossoming on the Clark College campus this festival celebrates, the 10th anniversary of Clark's Sakura celebration, and the 20th anniversary of the Vancouver-Joyo Sister City relationship.

The festival will begin with opening remarks at 1 p.m. at the Royce E. Pollard Japanese Friendship Garden, which is located next to the Beacock Music Hall on Clark's main campus. (In the event of inclement weather the ceremony will be held in Gaiser

Student Center.) Dignitaries who are scheduled to speak include Vancouver Mayor Tim Leavitt; John Kageyama, President of America Kotobuki; Hiroshi Furusawa, Portland Consul General; Tatsuo Ito, Executive Vice President of SEH America Inc.; and Clark College international student Erina Yamazaki. Located within Kyoto Prefecture, Joyo is Vancouver's official sister city in Japan.

The opening ceremony will include a koto performance by Yukiko Vossen and a performance by the Clark College Women's Ensemble. The koto, a stringed musical instrument, is the national instrument of Japan.

From 2 to 3:30 p.m., the Sakura celebration will continue in the Gaiser Student Center, where guests will enjoy family-friendly cultural activities including a dance performance by the Clark College Japanese Club, a greeting from the children in the college's Child & Family Studies program, and a performance by members of the Portland Taiko Drum Group. Refreshments will be served. Information about the Sakura Ceremony is available at [www.clark.edu/cc/sakura](http://www.clark.edu/cc/sakura).

All events are free and open to the public. The Sakura Festival is sponsored by Clark College, the City of Vancouver and the Vancouver Rotary. For video of last year's Sakura celebration, please visit Clark's YouTube channel.

Clark College is located at 1933 Fort Vancouver Way, Vancouver. Driving directions and parking maps are available at [www.clark.edu/maps](http://www.clark.edu/maps). Individuals who need accommodation due to a disability in order to fully participate in this event should contact Clark College's Disability Support Services Office at 360-992-2314 or 360-991-0901 (VP) or visit the Penguin Union Building room 013.

*Photo: Clark College/Jenny Shadley*



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# A Lesson They Can Wear



It's the first sunny day the children in Terry Hays's classroom in Clark College's Child & Family Studies program have seen for a while, and the classroom's staff need a few moments to gather everyone on the carpeted area normally reserved for Story Time. But as Hays speaks, the children settle down to listen.

"All right, friends," she says. "Let's sit down. I would like to welcome Michiyo to our classroom. Can you say, 'Konnichi wa?'"

"Konnichi wa," chorus the children, ages 3 to 5. Japanese professor Michiyo Okuhara beams at them.



*"Konnichi wa! Hello there!"* she says. "My name is Michiyo, and I'm going to show you some traditional kimono from Japan." With that, Okuhara pulls a vibrantly patterned kimono from a bag, and the children gasp.

Okuhara doesn't just show off the kimono: With the help of volunteers from Clark's Japanese Club, she fits many of the children with pint-sized kimonos from her collection. She explains that this activity is in preparation for Clark's annual Sakura Festival on April 17, where the children will appear in the finale of a kimono fashion show.



Professor Michiyo Okuhara shows how to wrap a kimono.

While the kimono demonstration is new, the partnership between Hays and Okuhara goes back seven years, when Okuhara's own son was a child in Hays's classroom. At the time, Clark College had just begun holding a celebration of the campus's 100 shirofugen cherry trees, a living symbol of friendship between the people of Vancouver and Japan. Hays invited Okuhara to visit her classroom to share stories about sakura celebrations in Okuhara's native Japan. From that beginning has developed a rich partnership; today, with the help of the Rotary Club of Vancouver, children in the CFS program participate in an artwork exchange with children in a preschool in Vancouver's sister city of Jojo, Japan. CFS children also attend Sakura each year, learning about Japanese culture.

"I'm always looking for ways to involve our children in the

community on campus,” says Hays. “It’s a wonderful resource for us. We track the [shirofugen] trees each year, visiting them during each season. When they blossom, we have a picnic down there. And having Michiyo visit each year and share her experience, that’s a great way for our children to learn about another part of the world.”



Teira Harbeson, *left*, and Abigail Sloan, *right*, help a fellow member of the Japanese Club adjust her kimono.

It isn’t only the children who are learning: Japanese Club member Teira Harbeson says that visiting the classroom is giving her a taste of what may be in store for her one day. “I want to become a teacher myself,” says the 21-year-old sophomore, who says her interest in Japan was reinforced when she traveled there with Okuhara last year through Clark’s Study Abroad program. “I want to travel to Japan and teach English there, and while this is a different age group, it still gives me some experience.”

Japanese Club member Abigail Sloan adds that she wished she’d had opportunities to experience other cultures at such an early age. “I think it opens things up for them,” says the 15-year-old Mountain View High student, who attends Clark through Running Start. “The world is becoming more and more globalized, and it’s really good for citizens to get exposure

to other cultures early on.”

The time has come for the children to take off their kimono and go play outside. As they wait to have their obi untied, one girl fingers the pink flowers on her kimono thoughtfully. Then she looks up at a visitor and says, “I want to know about Japan. I want to know *lots* more!”

*Photos: Clark College/Jenny Shadley*