

# A SHORT HISTORY OF THE JAPANESE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF INDIANA (JAAI)

by Michele Yamanaka

Before 1984, there were already a number of Japanese people living in Fort Wayne and the surrounding area. Etsuko Bundy, who was a survivor of the atomic bomb blast of Nagasaki, had married an American and lived in Fort Wayne. Every December she would invite all the Japanese people she knew and anyone interested in Japan to her home for a party. Japanese business families, Japanese immigrants, Japanese and American couples, Japanese exchange students – all were welcome. Everyone brought Japanese food to share and all enjoyed a time of building or renewing friendships. Many Japanese married to Americans came with their children. This is how I met Etsuko. We ate Japanese food on Japanese style low tables, the children learned to play the game GO, and the card game Hanafuda. At some point, we all danced a Bon Odori dance single file throughout her house. Through these special times, the children learned about Japanese culture and their heritage.



Back row, Left to right: Keiko-san, Reiko Watson, Michele Yamanaka  
Middle row: Kathy Dekilas, Miyako, Mariko Stevenson, Patty Sprau  
Front row: Kazuko-san, Reiko Shaw, Keiko-san, Kamiki-san, Kashi-san  
(Please send name corrections to Michele Yamanaka)

A tragedy happened one year. Hiromi Shindo, an exchange student, was critically injured in a car accident. Her family came to Fort Wayne to be with her, but neither parent understood English. The Japanese people here decided to work together to help Hiromi’s parents. They helped them find a place to stay, took them grocery shopping, provided transportation and translation in doctor visits. It took at least 7 months for Hiromi to heal enough to return to Japan. The Japanese-American community became like a family through this time of helping.

After Hiromi returned to Japan, the Japanese-American community felt a need to spend more time together. Dan Yamanaka encouraged them to do more things as a community. So, in 1984, Kyoko Maruyama, Reiko Shaw, and Dan Yamanaka formed a committee to plan a Christmas party. For the first time, it was necessary to charge a small fee to pay for the rental of a facility. One of the committee members received the fees, paid the bills, and kept any leftover money in a box. The same committee planned a summer picnic in 1985 and another Christmas party in 1985. At the 1985 Christmas party, they asked for volunteers to be the committee people for the next year and be responsible for planning the picnic and next Christmas party. People paid a small fee at both the picnic and Christmas party so that sites and special foods could be arranged. The box with any money was turned over to the new committee. This became the way the Japanese-American community was organized. Every year new volunteers would agree to plan the next year. The group was first called the "Japanese American Association" (JAA) in 1990. The first attempt to put in writing about how the group functioned and why it existed was written in 1992. The goals were:

The group was first called the "Japanese American Association (JAA) in 1990

1. To help, assist, encourage and comfort each other when there is need: birth of a child, death, marriage, accident, serious illness, etc.
2. To give opportunity for enjoyment of Japanese culture and develop friendships (annual July picnic and December Christmas party)
3. To aid Japanese people new to Fort Wayne to become adjusted: help find doctors, dentists, insurance, schools, oriental food sources, church, English teacher, etc.
4. Provide a positive influence for Japanese-American relations.

For the next 11 years, JAA was run by volunteers as a committee and there was always a summer picnic and a December or January party. However, people moved away, children grew up, and interest declined. In 2003, only 13 people came to the Winter party, which was held in January 2004 because of a reservation cancelation and no one wanted to volunteer for 2004. Michele Yamanaka volunteered to help the 2003 committee (Jeff and Waka Worman) for 2004. A decision had to be made: discontinue the JAA or remake it. Michele felt that JAA was important in order to help Japanese-American children to learn about and appreciate their heritage. She did an Internet search to look for people of Japanese heritage in the Fort Wayne area that could be cultural resources. She found an article about Dorothy Kittaka, who was co-founder with Mike Schmid of FAME, and contacted her. Dorothy had not known about JAA and agreed with its goals. She contacted Dr. Daniel Quinn and Kei Quinn about developing JAA. Dorothy, Dan, Kei, and Michele planned a Christmas party in 2004 at the Harlan Shelter House (reserved by Wormans) that included Dorothy talking about her life in an internment camp, Dan playing Japanese music, and Sayaka Ganz and Kei doing origami with the children. As part of the party, there was a brainstorming time with all who came to learn from them about what they thought the JAA should be doing. The ideas presented at that party became the blueprint for JAA.



At 2004 Winter Party



Children at 2004 Winter Party

Here are some of those ideas:

1. Kei Quinn, who was teaching at a Japanese Saturday School in Indianapolis said we should look into a Saturday School in Fort Wayne.
2. Daniel Quinn suggested we try a Japanese cultural festival, which later became the “Cherry Blossom Festival”.
3. Have a quarterly newsletter to connect the various parts of the Japanese American Community.



“JAPANESE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF INDIANA” WAS REGISTERED IN FORT WAYNE IN 2004.

Michele did not want to keep money in a box anymore. To open a bank account, she had to register a name. So “Japanese American Association of Indiana” was registered in Fort Wayne in 2004 and a checking account for JAAI was opened in 2005.

In 2005, Anita Yamanaka-Bryan, who was on the JAA committee and also part of the Fort Wayne-Allen County Economic Development Alliance, did preliminary groundwork for a Saturday School and worked with IPFW and the Fort Wayne Sister Cities International. With Prof. Koichiro Otani’s cooperation, IPFW agreed to host the Saturday School. The Japanese Saturday School was designed and ready to run in August 2005. A letter (August 2005) is on file from IPFW thanking the Japanese American Association and Fort Wayne Sister Cities International as “leading supporters of the initiative”. However, there were no students registered in 2005, so it did not actually start until 2006. Mr. Tamura, who became involved in July 2005 with JAA, was a tremendous help in getting students for 2006.

Also in 2005, Anita organized the first golf outing and DeBrand Chocolate tour in August. It was highly successful and more than 82 people participated. There was representation from Fifth Third Bank, C & M Fine Pack, FCC (Indiana LLC), Tokai Rika, SEAVAC USA, NISCO, CME, Kamaya and more.

A subcommittee was formed to work towards a Cherry Blossom Festival in 2007, to coincide with the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our sister city relationship with Takaoka.

Michele Yamanaka created the first two Japanese American community newsletters-one in June and one in November.

2006 was a busy year. The JAAI had a booth at the International Festival, worked on the 2007 Cherry Blossom Festival, planned a Summer Festival (organized by Mr. Tamura), and supported the JSS. JAAI began discussing the possibility of incorporating and becoming a non-profit. Mr. Tamura started the Kawara-ban.

In 2007, the first Cherry Blossom Festival was held in Fort Wayne and was very successful. Fort Wayne Sister Cities International, Inc. agreed to serve as fiscal agent until such time as the festival could be its own fiscal agent. JAAI had a New Year Party, was again at the International Festival, sponsored a summer picnic, and had a golf outing (planned by Mr. Tamura). The committee (Dan Quinn, Dorothy Kittaka, Junko Richards, Michele Yamanaka, Mr. Tamura) was overworked. From 2008, JAAI focused on the Cherry Blossom Festival, the New Year party and becoming incorporated, although one golf outing\* and the “Spirit of Budo” event was planned by Mr. Tamura. JAAI became incorporated in 2009 and then began to investigate becoming a non-profit entity. As stated in the Articles of Incorporation the goals of JAAI are:

JAAI became incorporated in 2009.

1. To conduct and foster programs, outreach activities and services and to sponsor a wide range of cultural events that explore the Japan-United States relationship, such as those which support the Japanese Saturday school at PFW;
2. To provide Indiana's youth and communities with educational experiences of Japanese culture and enhanced international understanding;
3. To conduct family events and cultural gatherings to bring together people of both countries and provide educational opportunities
4. To provide a clearing house for information related to legal, health and social issues of elderly members of the Japanese-American community.

The Directors of the corporation were: Michele Yamanaka, Dorothy Kittaka, Dan Quinn and Junko Richards.

From 2010 to 2016, JAAI continued to sponsor only the Cherry Blossom Festival and a New Year event. In 2016, Fort Wayne Sister Cities International, Inc. told JAAI its intention to stop being the fiscal agent for the Cherry Blossom Festival by 2018. During 2017, JAAI explored the possibility of finding a new fiscal agent or finally becoming its own 501 c 3 organization. It decided to apply for 501 c 3 status. After completing a constitution and bylaws and filing the application, JAAI became a 501 c 3 corporation in February 2018. It has a 9-member Board of Directors. Its mission statement is TO CELEBRATE ALL THINGS JAPANESE IN NORTHEAST INDIANA THROUGH FESTIVALS, EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS, AND OTHER ACTIVITIES. It has 3 committees:



JAAI BECAME A 501 C 3  
CORPORATION IN FEBRUARY  
2019.

- Program Committee – Cherry Blossom Festival, summer picnic, New Year Party, workshops
- Publicity Committee – Nippon Quarterly, website, Facebook
- Governance Committee – Organizational needs, bylaws, elections

Today, JAAI is a community organization trying to bring together all segments of the Japanese American community into a “family” to support and encourage each other and share Japanese culture with each other, our children, and the community around us. We are nothing without you, our Japanese and Japanese-American “family”. We welcome your help, your ideas, and your support.

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\* In 2008, Mr. Tamura planned a golf outing as a staff member of Alliance and a supporter of JAAI. After 2008, Mr. Tamura continued to plan golf outings personally and reported about them in the Kawara-ban, but Minutes of JAAI committee meetings did not mention them and the golf outings were not part of JAAI planning. So, after JAAI became a NPO in 2018, it requested this Golf outing to not use JAAI in the title because JAAI was not planning it, JAAI financial activity had to be through JAAI, and the golf outing finances were independent from JAAI. JAAI continued to support the outing as a good community event.