



Japan-America Society of Tennessee Public Awareness Initiative

Impact: Japanese Business Investment in Tennessee

In association with the Tennessee World Affairs Council

Verbatim Transcript

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Video Recording on the JAST YouTube Channel

Speaker 1 [00:00:23] Hello, I'm Patrick Ryan from the Tennessee World Affairs Council, and welcome to Impact: Japanese Business Investment in Tennessee, the special project of the Japan-America Society of Tennessee. Today, we're talking with Celeste Wilson, who's the Senior Director for Donor Engagement at the United Way of Tennessee. She has a background in Japanese business relations in the United States, and we are pleased to talk with you today, Celeste, about your background and insights and perspectives on the impact of that commercial relationship. So welcome, Celeste, and thanks for your time today.

Speaker 2 [00:01:00] Well, thank you so much for having me, Pat. It's an honor to be a part of this illustrious series. Of course, I know Japan-America Society of Tennessee well. I once served on the board and I strongly believe in the work of JAST and how strongly JAST is working to bring Japanese businesses in Tennessee and Tennessee businesses together. So again, thank you so much for having me here today.

Speaker 1 [00:01:27] Oh, you're welcome, Celeste, and we're honored to have you as part of this project. Let's start with a little bit of your background. Tell us how you got interested in international business, what your experience has been, especially dealing with Japanese companies and your leadership role, and what you've learned about the Japanese investment in the United States. And we'll get to the impact here in Tennessee.

Speaker 2 [00:01:55] Sure. That's a that's a lofty question. I'll do my best, but I actually first became involved with the Japanese culture and society in business when I was 18 years old. I applied for an exchange student program and ended up in Japan, living with a Japanese family for a year. It was a gap year for me, so I took a year off between high school and college. And in those days, that was highly unusual, but obviously very worth it for me. I'm still in very close touch with the family with whom I lived in Japan, and obviously that year had such an impact on me that when I came back to Duke, I majored in

Japanese studies and then moved to D.C., where I worked for a law firm that represented Japanese clients, including Toyota at about the same time Governor Alexander was working with the Japanese to come to Tennessee. I worked for the law firm and wrote memos to the Japanese clients, especially the car manufacturers about the importance of opening factories in the United States because this was right in the middle of the trade war of the mid 70s. So it was a mess. I loved it, but I made the decision after several years at the law firm that I did not want to be a lawyer. So I ended up at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies in D.C. and got my master's in international relations with a focus on Japanese studies. To graduate from SAIS, one must be fluent in the language one selects. And of course, when I was in Japan, I learned to speak Japanese because I was immersed in the language, and I continued with my study of Japanese through graduate school. And even to this day, I'm still studying Japanese. But it was a wonderful experience for me, and I ended up working for the dean of Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. His name was Dean George Packard. George had actually worked for a Reischauer, Ambassador Reischauer when he was the ambassador under President Kennedy, and George himself had lived in Japan in the 50s. He was very dedicated as well to enhancing Japanese studies at SAIS School of Advanced International Studies. So he hired me to come on board, and together we built the Reischauer Center for Japanese Studies at Johns Hopkins. What that meant was planning programming with Japanese leaders in the area, with senators, with congressmen and also traveling back and forth to Japan to raise money from Japanese businessmen. And it was mostly businessmen in that in that day, it was actually kind of -

Speaker 1 [00:04:57] Certainly Ambassador Reischauer - those were very formative years in the US Japanese relationship, so that that must have been quite an insightful experience building that legacy and SAIS.

Speaker 2 [00:05:10] It was wonderful. I did not work with Ambassador Reischauer, but I did work with George, who absolutely admired him. As you can imagine and all that he was able to do to continue the relationship between the United States and Japan. He was ambassador in the early 60s. And if you think about it, that was 15 years after the war was over. So that's why his role was so important. And to me, it's fascinating that we now have had two Japanese ambassadors to Japan from Tennessee, so I feel very fortunate to almost be in the right place at the right time when it comes to our Japanese ambassador, ambassadors to Japan. But in any case, that was a great experience, and I think the highlight was when we at Johns Hopkins conveyed upon the prime minister at the time, Nakasone, an honorary degree from SAIS. So we went over to Japan and with Great Majesty at the Plaza Hotel - sorry, at the Hotel Okura - conveyed an honorary degree upon the the Prime Minister, and that was needless to say, a lot of fun and lots of stories went along with that project. I ended up moving to Dallas, Texas, from D.C. in the mid 80s because my husband at the time had secured a job in Dallas and I thought, What will I ever do in Dallas that relates to the Japanese business community? Well, as we all know, connections are very helpful, and I met someone who introduced me to someone who introduced me to a wonderful Japanese businessman whose name was Iwasaki Wawasan and Wawasan's father, was actually the chair of the board of the Fuji Bank Group. And so Wawasan hired me to be the United States representative of his company. He was based in Tokyo, I was based in Dallas, and we worked on mergers and acquisitions between mostly Buyo group businesses, but also businesses in Dallas. And these were small to midsize companies. One of our businesses, in fact, was one of the early developers of a drug for AIDS and was looking for a partner in Japan, and we found a pharmaceutical company to connect the two of them. Another was involved, for instance, in how shall I put a photography and online video, even though online wasn't a word in those days, but he

was - we connected him with a photography company in Japan, and they developed some, I guess, in those days the word wasn't software, but something along those lines to enhance cameras and photography. So I had a great time doing that. But the thing is, I only lived in Dallas for about a year. I then moved to Nashville because again we were transferred to Nashville. And so that was in 1987, and I've been here ever since. Fortunately, when I moved to Tennessee, one of the very first people I met was Ed Nelson. And I know when I mentioned Ed's name, almost everyone who's watching this video is going to smile because Ed was beloved. Ed was the honorary consul general to Japan from Nashville, and he was delightful and immersed in everything Japan related here in Tennessee. So he and I worked together on some projects and really enjoyed the opportunity to get to know him, and he got to know he was our son and they came to visit. And so as anyone will know, gregarious Ed and gregarious Wawasan became fast friends. That's not hard to understand. In other words, I was able to transfer the work I was doing with Wawasan in Tokyo to Nashville as well, while continuing to commute to Dallas. So for about 10 years, I commuted from Nashville to Dallas and visited Tokyo. Quite a bit, of course, to meet with users and their clients.

Patrick Ryan [00:09:41] And those were days when we didn't have a consul general in Nashville, as we do now. So I'm sure the role of the honorary consul was more outsized than it would be today.

Celeste Wilson [00:09:54] That's exactly right. In fact, it was Ed who pushed the idea of bringing the consul general from New Orleans to Tennessee due to the fact that there was so much business in Tennessee and a Nashville location would be central for the ambassador. The hurricane hit and that was delayed a little bit, but Satosan ... was our first ambassador or first consul general in Tennessee for Japan, and Ed is the one who found the beautiful house where the consul general lives now. So Ed, I wouldn't say begrudgingly, I would say with delight and happiness because the consul general chose Nashville, turned the reins over to the consul general. And of course, we've had a string of amazing consul generals ever since.

Patrick Ryan [00:10:54] To be sure. Okay, so you you've been immersed in this Japanese experience from the end of your high school days until up till now. And you have an appreciation for the scope and depth of Japanese foreign direct investment in the United States more broadly. And you understand the particulars of the investment here. The automotive industry initially was a large footprint in some of the communities, Middle Tennessee and so forth, but it's expanded around the state in terms of the automotive sector, suppliers and so forth. But its increase in the number of sectors that are represented. We have companies like NTT Data here now and others that have given Tennessee really some inroads into being a leading state in the United States among foreign direct investment, especially from Japan. Give us your insights and perspectives on what that means the tendency to be such a recipient of all these businesses and business interests them and the prosperity that comes along with it.

Celeste Wilson [00:12:08] Well, truthfully, I think it all goes back to Senator Alexander, who was pressured, sufficiently pressured to recognize the topography in Tennessee would be absolutely appealing to Japanese businesses. The location is central throughout the United States, as we well know, and Tennessee is a friendly state. Tennesseans generally are welcoming and open to new newcomers, and I'm hoping and thinking that Japanese business people here recognized that they were welcome and are welcome and will always be welcome in Nashville and throughout Tennessee. I can add a little bit of a different perspective as well because I work at United Way. I have found that Japanese

businesses in the area are very generous businesses to our community. Bridgestone, as we well know, I think Chris Karboriak is one of the interviewees can talk a lot about what Bridgestone has done in the community, and I will also say that this is a salute to the current CEO of Bridgestone. Bridgestone had the largest United Way campaign this year, raising over \$2 million through United Way of Greater Nashville. And that, to me, is an indication of the culture recognizing the importance of a strong community. Nissan has also been a very strong partner of United Way, so we're very fortunate that Japanese businesses understand that the community is a community for all of us, and we are so lucky to have leaders that are committed to the community and that is Japanese as well as the American leaders at the Japanese companies well.

Patrick Ryan [00:14:05] In all of our interviews, we've been hearing about the involvement of Japanese businesses across Tennessee that get involved in communities. For example, the Calsonic Arena, where the Tennessee Walking Horse exhibition is held, was provided by the Calsonic company we see in and around Nashville. The names of Japanese businesses on this that public structure, so I appreciate your mentioning the philanthropic efforts of Japanese businesses in the community. It adds more to the understanding what the impact of the businesses are. You know, we also look at the economic and community development aspect of this and I'm sure you're aware of the impact, maybe not the specific numbers, but in terms of the prosperity that is brought to Tennesseans through jobs and community development in places from Maryville to Memphis and up and down from Kentucky to the Alabama line. Any perspectives or your experience in business that you can help us understand how some of that expansion benefits the people of Tennessee?

Celeste Wilson [00:15:28] Well, I think that the people of Tennessee can always benefit from the diversity of the population and especially when companies like Bridgestone and Nissan are choosing to make their headquarters in Nashville. We're finding, as you can attest, other U.S. organizations making a decision to move here as well. And I think that impact is a profound one in terms of jobs, the workplace, the workforce and what we all can learn. Another kind of fun impact of all of this has been wonderful Japanese restaurants and Japanese grocery stores, and we can't forget the cultural aspects of all of this as well. We have also a sister city in Japan, which I think is very important. Kamakura is our sister city, and for those of you who don't know sister cities as a national organization and Nashville has a sister cities organization, we have nine sister cities throughout the world and one of them is in Kamakura, Japan. What's interesting about that is I mentioned Consul General Sato, who was our first consul general. He was, of course, beloved as well when he came to Nashville. He had three goals, and someone else might have referenced this during the interviews that he wanted to start a cherry blossom festival. And we now know that our Cherry Blossom Festival is the largest festival of its kind in the southeast, and we cannot wait until April 10th when we resume the Cherry Blossom Festival. Second, he wanted to establish a sister city relationship with the Japanese city, and he just happened to suggest Kamakura because it was his birthplace. And so we now have a formal relationship with Kamakura Karl Dean. Mayor Dean went over to sign the agreement and we had a great delegation, including Ralph Schultz and Chris and others from the Tennessee business community attending that ceremony. It was lots of fun. The third thing he wanted to do was learn to play country music and he learned to play the guitar. And I imagine a lot of you listening to this interview will remember the times when we would go down into the basement and he would play and ... would play. And it was just so much fun because he had a ball playing American and Japanese songs on his guitar for the entire community. So again, there's, I believe, just a warmth among Japanese and Nashvillians and Japanese and others from around the state. There's a

great feeling of warmth between the two peoples that expands beyond just business, but also into the cultural arena as well. We're very fortunate.

Patrick Ryan [00:18:44] Well, you talk about the continuing Consul General Sato and the Cherry Blossom Festival. He also brought the gift of the trees to a time, and we can appreciate that every time, especially in the spring when the trees are in blossom. But I think we may not be pushing Washington out of the way Washington, D.C. is in terms of the festival, but we certainly have a fantastic showing of the trees and the festival downtown at the public square and I along with you. I'm looking forward to that. We also should emphasize the fact that sister cities this isn't just, you know, some tacit arrangement between cities and the mayors go over and shake hands with that kind of thing. But this program includes youth exchanges, cultural awareness for young people and older people. But there's a lot of emphasis on youth exchanges. I know there are Americans who go to Japan as a result of this and learn Japanese culture and they see the sights. And of course, the iconic debut to the Buddha in Kamakura is is a central theme for the relationship. But there's a lot there in the sister cities relationship, and I understand that you are a proud board member of sister cities and we salute the work that goes on there. And I think that Nashville gets a lot out of that relationship. And I will mention that in all the interviews we do and you touched on this, a key word that keeps popping up on everyone's lips is the word relationship. This isn't just a group of business people who have come to Tennessee to build some factories because this or that economic advantage. But the B and the relationships that were fostered, as you correctly point out, starting with Governor Alexander at the time, now, Senator retired Alexander. But all roads seem to lead to Lamar Alexander in talking about building the relationship and how that is carried down with everyone we've spoken with as part of this project. The relationships have been the key and it's been reciprocated on both sides.

Celeste Wilson [00:21:09] Well, I think that's true, and I often hearken back to something Mike Mansfield said. Senator Mansfield was another wonderful ambassador to Japan, and he is often quoted as saying the U.S.-Japanese relationship is the most important bilateral relationship in the world, bar none. And I'm, of course, a little bit partial, but I know other relationships are as important as that. But I think that we are just so fortunate to have a strong sense of community, the strong commitment by Japanese companies to strong commitment by our state and city toward making the Japanese feel at home in Tennessee, whether it's Nashville or Memphis or Chattanooga or Marysville. We are so pleased and happy that the investment continues to grow. And I think that anyone you talked to who knows about Japanese investment in Tennessee recognizes that it took a lot of people to make that happen. And I can't possibly name them all, but I think you're going to probably be interviewing all of them.

Patrick Ryan [00:22:20] So we need to reach as many, many as possible and we continue to add names. So we'll talk offline about who in your in your arena might fit the bill to talk with us about this project. So any final comments you have on what Japanese business and the relationship, the commercial relationship as the Tennessee to the United States, to Americans across the board?

Celeste Wilson [00:22:52] Sure. I think that the relationship again helps reduce barriers. It helps increase understanding and helps grow relationships. And one final plea I would have is a nonstop flight from Nashville to Tokyo.

Patrick Ryan [00:23:13] There are there are rumors that that's always around the corner and knock on wood once we get out of this pandemic mess. I think travel will become

much more a topic of interest and progress. And with the brilliant new airport that is being built around what BNA has been working to do, a day where international is clearly an afterthought, it will become redundant and understanding what's going on at the airport out there.

Celeste Wilson [00:23:53] And pat again, one last one last note. Thank you for organizing this and thank you for the World Affairs Council because you too are playing a role on a daily basis with fascinating interviews and inclusiveness in bringing people together, not just from Japan, but from all over the world. So thank you for your leadership.

Patrick Ryan [00:24:14] Well, thanks for your kind words. I appreciate that, and thanks again for your time today and sharing your perspectives on this important topic. The impact of Japanese business investment in Japan. That's it for this episode. Please check the JAST YouTube channel for more of these interviews and the series impact Japanese business investment in Tennessee. You can find an index that will lead you to other videos and transcripts of all the interviews on the website of the Tennessee World Affairs Council, and that is TNWAC.org/JAST and there's a wealth of important information there for you to help understand the importance of what people like governor Alexander, Governor Sundquist, all the other governors, the people from the Economic and Community Development Arena, the public sector, the private sector, public and average citizens, people in the communities have done to ensure that Tennessee has benefited from this relationship. So that's it. Again, Celeste, thank you so much for being with me today.

Celeste Wilson [00:25:23] Thank you very much. And I look forward to seeing as many of you as possible sooner rather than later.

Patrick Ryan [00:25:29] Exactly. Thank you all. Everybody have a good day.