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Japan-America Society of Tennessee Public Awareness Initiative

Impact: Japanese Business Investment in Tennessee

In association with the Tennessee World Affairs Council

Verbatim Transcript

A Conversation with Ginger Byrn

Japan-America Society of Tennessee

Executive Administrator, Director of Programs and Membership Development

Video Recording on the JAST YouTube Channel

Patrick Ryan [00:00:23] Hello, I'm Patrick Ryan from the Tennessee World Affairs Council, and today we are talking with Ginger Byrn from the Japan-America Society of Tennessee in our project, the Impact of Japanese Business in Tennessee, which is a project of the Japan-America Society of Tennessee. So we're very happy to have Ginger with us today. Ginger is the Executive Administrator of JAST, the Japan-American Society of Tennessee, as well as Director of Programs and Membership Development. So Ginger, welcome to our program today and thanks for taking time to talk to us about the impact of Japanese business in Tennessee.

Ginger Byrn [00:01:05] Thank you, Pat, and thank you for everything you're doing with this project. It's really great.

Patrick Ryan [00:01:09] Oh, you bet. So let's start at the beginning here. JAST has been around since 2000. Why don't you give us a description of the role and mission of the Japan-America Society?

Ginger Byrn [00:01:23] Well, JAST is a business focused organization. Our mission is to strengthen the bilateral economic future for both Japan and Tennessee. And we do this through our signature events and other programs that that promote mutual understanding and cultural awareness among both the Japanese communities in Tennessee and the non Japanese communities in Tennessee.

Patrick Ryan [00:01:47] And JAST is a membership organization that includes businesses and individuals. Can you talk about the composition of the board and the membership and and who all is involved in what makes JAST go?

Ginger Byrn [00:02:05] Most of our members are corporate members. We do have some individual members and most of our members as I said are corporations and other

organizations and representatives of those corporations and organizations also make up our now 23 member board of directors. And we do depend upon the membership fees, sponsorships and also grants to fund our programs and organization throughout the year.

Patrick Ryan [00:02:31] And it's business focused, so in what way does JAST work with the businesses in the state?

Ginger Byrn [00:02:39] Well we offer programs, business focused programs. Two of our signature events are business focused programs. The Tennessee Japan Forum, which also is our annual meeting, which generally happens in the first quarter of the year but this year it will be in May, and also the Women's Leadership Forum and Networking Luncheon, which is usually late fall, early winter. And then we also have two significant cultural events that we offer - the Nashville Cherry Blossom Festival and the Memphis Japan Festival.

Patrick Ryan [00:03:09] Let's talk a little bit about the business forum that will be in May. What kinds of things happen there?

Ginger Byrn [00:03:14] Well, we invite experts, both the Japanese and American experts, to come to talk about the situation, the geostrategic issues in Asia and other issues that are important to both Japan and Tennessee. And then we invite our membership and also non-members to attend.

Patrick Ryan [00:03:39] And I'm sure that's heavy with networking and making contacts and business development.

Ginger Byrn [00:03:45] Right.

Patrick Ryan [00:03:47] So the cultural events that are on the JAST schedule - those of us here in Nashville are very familiar with the Cherry Blossom Festival. Unfortunately, it's been disrupted somewhat in the last two years with the pandemic. Tell us a little bit about the festival in years prior to COVID. What would that look like in terms of the scope and scale and participation of people from around Tennessee?

Ginger Byrn [00:04:18] So the last year we had a festival in 2019, of course, and we fortunately had two years of rain, rainy day. 2018 and 2019 were both not so nice weather wise. So our attendance was a little lower in both of those years. But 2017 was actually our highest attendance event. We had 45,000 people attend in 2017. But even on the rainy days the attendance was good. We have a lot of loyal festival fans of all ages who like to attend. It's a very family friendly event. We have children's activities. We have cultural lectures, performances by Japanese entertainers or by other entertainers who perform Japanese dance and music. And we have a lot of great Japanese food and anime. We have a huge section of anime, which is very popular. So it's a really fun day and there's no charge for admission. So we get a lot of people attend and it takes place on public square in front of the Metro courthouse.

Patrick Ryan [00:05:27] It's a great event. I'll provide a testimonial that, yes, there is great food and music and entertainment down there. It's a terrific event and really a highlight of the festival season in Nashville, and a great tradition of the cherry blossoms here in Nashville, a gift from the Japanese government.

Ginger Byrn [00:05:46] Right. Well, the festival started because the Consul General at the time, because of General Sato, who wanted to plant cherry blossom trees in Nashville, a

thousand trees over a period of 10 years. And so he also thought that there should be a festival to mark the occasion of the planting of the cherry blossom trees. And I think the festival has grown beyond anyone's expectations. It started out in 2009 with some Tycho drumming and a couple of hundred people attending, and the planting of the first cherry blossom tree at National Public Square has grown a lot in the past since 2009, and it's been really exciting to watch the growth and to watch people enjoy themselves. Really, it's a really nice day. We are going to bring it back this year on April 9th, we're scheduled to bring it back, so hopefully everything will continue, we'll be able to continue moving ahead with the planning for the festival.

Patrick Ryan [00:06:45] That's great. I know as of this recording date in January we're looking at the in-person events, at least for the World Affairs Council, being kind of up in the air. So it's good to hear that the planning is going ahead for the festival this year. It's a great event. The festival in Memphis. Tell us a little bit about that. I know you were off doing that in November.

Ginger Byrn [00:07:10] Right, right. That event takes place at the Memphis Botanic Garden and it's a newer event. It had been going on for some time. The Botanic Garden had been organizing an event along with the University of Memphis Japanese language department, and they asked us if we would partner with them. And so we started in 2017. I believe that was the year we first started in Memphis. And it's a different event because it takes place at the garden and there is an admission charge because it's at the garden. But it is more - the event is different also because of the venue, because it's more spread out. The gardens are all around us. There's a Japanese garden at Memphis Botanic Garden, so it's also very family friendly event. We have a lot of the same entertainment and exhibitors and vendors who participate in this event as well.

Patrick Ryan [00:08:06] Now, all of these cultural events sprang from JAST's origins as a business focus group back in 2000, and at that time Japanese investment in Tennessee was already strong. We had the large manufacturing plants and Tennessee was seen as - had come of age as an automotive manufacturing state, and the Japanese companies that were here were largely automotive with the suppliers and so forth, but have expanded to include many other sectors of investment. What is the legacy of JAST to those origins in the business community? Is there still a sense that the overwhelming mission is to cultivate the relationship between government, business, private sectors, communities? Can you talk to us about how JAST is integrated in building these, maintaining the foundations of these connections?

Ginger Byrn [00:09:12] Yes, that's still important. And we still - we believe that the relationship between Tennessee and Japan is very important. And so that's still an important part of what we do. One thing that we're trying to do more recently is to reach out more to the Japanese community in Tennessee, and many of our projects and events we try to make more welcoming for them. And we also have publications that we distribute now in Japanese, including our weekly news digest that we distribute both in English and Japanese. Our monthly newsletter we also translate to Japanese. We have our daily The Guide to Daily Living in Tennessee, which is in Japanese and available online to try to help and answer questions, mostly for Japanese who are new to the state of Tennessee.

Patrick Ryan [00:10:09] And how do people get connected to those media?

Ginger Byrn [00:10:14] Well, we have a list. So they contact us. We, you know, through our years, you know, we've developed a contact list for Japanese in particular but we're

always open to anybody who would like to receive those digital publications, and also who would like access to the Daily Living Guide. And we also have a Japanese hotline, a telephone that's answered by Japanese Speaker Raina Lyons, who's now our Japanese outreach manager, to answer any questions that they may have about living in Tennessee and anything like that that helps them to be more comfortable and happy living in Tennessee.

Patrick Ryan [00:10:58] And they can make those contacts on the website, which correct me if I'm wrong, JASTN.org.

Ginger Byrn [00:11:03] Correct.

Patrick Ryan [00:11:07] Okay, and we'll put the phone number and that web address in the video archive details so people can check that out. So what do you see going forward for JAST? You know, we talked to Leigh Wieland, who was CEO of JAST for many years and others. John Scannapieco, who was chairman of the board of JAST for a while. And the word that continues to pop up is relationship and that 'R' word is heard over and over again from those like John Gregory, who was in the Tennessee ECD early on in building the relationship with Japanese, and relationship seems to be the watchword. So I suppose among all of the satellites in the orbit of the US-Japanese business relationship - there's the government, the TNECD, there's obviously the corporations themselves, the public, the private sector. There's the consulate, which is the only foreign consulate here in Nashville now. And then there's JAST. So tell us what you see as relationship building going forward. You know, we've seen the emergence of these festivals and forums and so forth. So are we confident that the relationships will continue to be fostered by people of goodwill looking to do good things for Tennessee?

Ginger Byrn [00:12:37] Well, you know, we're sure going to keep at it. I mean, we work really closely with all of those organizations that you mentioned. There are partners and supporters, board members. So we work really closely with them and we will continue to offer programs that we hope will continue to build and strengthen the relationship and maintain the relationship, the good relationship that we have right now. And two of those new programs that we started offering in 2021 include the public awareness initiative that is helping with your project. And you know, we were pleased to be able to have the resources to offer this program to organizations who are coming up with projects that bolster the relationship between Japan and Tennessee as you're doing by telling the history of it. And then also we have the Matsui lecture series, which we started in 2021, and we hope to continue in 2020 too which are primarily business focused lectures and discussions, but we did do a cultural lecture on ... in December. And you know, this is all just to create a sense of community to engage both the Japanese and non-Japanese communities in Tennessee.

Patrick Ryan [00:14:04] Well, that's terrific, and on behalf of the World Affairs Council, thanks for the partnership that we've had with JAST and working together on this Impact of Japanese Business in Tennessee project, I think it's a very timely project that will help people understand the scope and depth of the relationship between Japanese businesses and the prosperity of Tennessee, not just here in the Nashville Middle Tennessee area, but across the state. And to that end, we invite people to visit the JAST YouTube channel and then go to YouTube.com and search for the Japan-America Society of Tennessee and there'll be a host of videos, interviews with people from government, business, public sector, et cetera who are providing insights and perspectives about Japanese investment in Tennessee. So thank you for the partnership with the Tennessee World Affairs Council

and JAST. I think we're contributing a lot to public information about what's happening in the world. We've been talking with Ginger Byrn. She is the Executive Administrator of the Japan-America Society of Tennessee and the Director of Programs and Membership Development. Ginger, any last words, comments that you'd like to leave us with?

Ginger Byrn [00:15:31] No, Pat, just thank you very much for everything you do.

Patrick Ryan [00:15:35] Great. Well, thank you again and thanks everyone for tuning in today. Again, visit the JAST YouTube channel for this program and others in the series. And you can also find an index of videos, along with transcripts of the interviews on the TNWAC.org/JAST web page. That's it for today. Thank you all for joining us today. Ginger, thanks again. Have a great day.