

A photograph of a man with short, light brown hair and glasses, wearing a green polo shirt. He is standing in a lush, green Japanese garden with various plants and trees in the background. The photo is submitted by Eric Erickson.

a summer of

exchange and remembrance



Como Park Senior High School social studies teacher Eric Erickson stands in front of Meigetsu-in Temple during his fellowship in Japan last month. (Photo submitted)

St. Paul celebrates its Japanese connections with August events

By **Eric Erickson**
a personal account

Eighty years ago in the summer of 1945, it would have been difficult to imagine celebrations of Japanese culture and heritage in the Como Park neighborhood of St. Paul.

But thankfully and impressively, things change, relationships evolve, and

former enemies of war celebrate peace.

On Aug. 9, 1945, the U.S. dropped an atomic bomb on Nagasaki, Japan which instantly killed over 40,000 civilians before tens of thousands more died of radiation poisoning. It was the second atomic bomb ever used in warfare (three days after the first one on Hiroshima) and it forced Japan's surrender on Aug. 14 to end World War II.

This August in Como Park, a delegation from Nagasaki will be attending a ceremony with St. Paul Mayor Melvin Carter

hosted by the St. Paul-Nagasaki Sister City Committee (SPNSCC).

Most St. Paulites don't know that we have a sister city. And not every resident of the Como area knows why we have a beautiful Japanese Garden, or a grove of cherry blossom trees, or a Global Harmony Labyrinth in the beloved park near the conservatory and zoo.

These places of beauty were from Nagasaki – gifted, designed, or inspired.



Como social studies teacher Eric Erickson (third from right) was one of seven North American teachers chosen for a fellowship hosted by the Keizai Koho Center in Tokyo during the end of June. (Photo courtesy of KKC)



The annual Cherry Blossom Festival in Como Park celebrates St. Paul's Sister City relationship with Nagasaki, Japan. (Photo by Eric Erickson)

EXCHANGE AND REMEMBRANCE >> from 1

The SPNSCC was established 10 years after the war's end in 1955 when Nagasaki accepted the committee's invitation. The goals were and continue to be fostering mutual understanding, building beneficial relationships, and promoting the cause of peace.

St. Paul's initiative was groundbreaking and predated a program in President Eisenhower's administration that created more sister city relationships to promote civilian diplomacy with Japan and other nations.

TEACHER FELLOWSHIP TO TOKYO

As a social studies teacher at Como Park High School, I have provided instruction about WWII for decades, attempting to inspire critical thinking regarding its end. I always found it remarkable that the U.S. and Japan have been such strong post-war allies.

The trust and interest in each other's cultures, as well as economic prosperity and trade, have become so entrenched that we forget about the past. However, the atrocities of war cannot be dismissed.

I was fortunate to receive a fellowship for 10 days of study in Japan last month through the Keizai Koho Center (KKC) in Tokyo. My application proposed a plan to incorporate study of current Japanese social and economic topics into a lesson while connecting my students to St. Paul's historic sister city ties to Nagasaki.

My takeaways from the fellowship experience are countless. The opportunities provided to me and six other teachers from North America were extraordinary. From meetings with current National Diet (Japanese legislature) representatives, a former Japanese ambassador to the U.S., policy experts, corporate visits and high

school visits, we were presented with a wealth of information and insight.

While that short list doesn't provide justice to the richness of the KKC fellowship, it might provide a glimpse into the type of immersive learning I was blessed to acquire. Adding cultural attractions, eating delicious, decorative meals of sushi, ramen bowls, and cuisine from bento boxes, plus a weekend homestay with a Japanese family made it even more unforgettable.

Consistently throughout dialogue and expression, the Japanese people made it clear that the strong relationship between our countries is valued and essential. When delicately pressing about World War II and how it's viewed and taught in Japan, answers revealed a shared mindset – Japan was defeated and rebuilt as a peaceful nation.

This is not to suggest there is complete harmony in Japanese politics. Like the U.S., there are opposing views on foreign policy and complex questions about interpretations of their constitution, especially Article 9 which states the "people forever renounce war" and does not allow for maintenance of "land, sea, and air forces."

And there are questions and concerns about current American politics, tariffs that are impacting the Japanese economy and global trade, and a dynamic geopolitical landscape in Asia.

Like many of the best learning experiences which involve critical thinking, I know more now than I did before my time in Japan, but I also have more questions than I did before going there.

While I couldn't travel to Nagasaki through the KKC fellowship program, it opened a door for one of my students



Rafael (Rafi) Gutierrez, a 2025 Como graduate, will represent St. Paul in Nagasaki as a youth ambassador.

to do so as a Youth Ambassador with the SPNSCC.

COMO STUDENT TO NAGASAKI

Applying for my fellowship sparked my outreach to the SPNSCC. Committee President JoAnn Blatchley shared her profound knowledge with me about our sister city history, exchanges, and events.

When Blatchley was informed about the sister city committee being able to send a delegation to Nagasaki this August for an annual peace ceremony on the 80th anniversary of the bomb, she reached out to me with a unique opportunity.

Last April, the committee opened a competitive application for the selection of two St. Paul Youth Ambassadors. I nominated Student Council President Rafael (Rafi) Gutierrez, a recent 2025 Como graduate who will study at Macalester next fall, to represent us in Nagasaki.

"There were many impressive applicants, and we would love to take them all, but Rafi stood out with his resume, essay and interview as uniquely and highly qualified," Blatchley said.

And Rafi has enthusiastically jumped into his role. On May 3, the SPNSCC celebrated the annual Cherry Blossom Festival in Como Park next to the grove of 20 cherry blossom trees that Nagasaki gifted to St. Paul in 2012. Rafi ran an origami station at the well-attended event.

Nagasaki is paying for all expenses to fly Rafi there on Aug. 6 along with Arden Kavaney of Harding High School, chaperoned by Harding Japanese language teacher Shannen Lach. Beyond the Peace Ceremony on Aug. 9, the ambassadors will collaborate with Japanese students, attend and speak at events, and tour the city to build cultural comprehension that can be brought back to St. Paul.

ALL ARE WELCOME TO AUGUST EVENTS

At the same time Nagasaki will be holding its Peace Ceremony, St. Paul will be hosting its Nagasaki Commemoration. All are welcome to gather in Como Park at the Global Harmony Labyrinth at 7 p.m. on Aug. 8, located just west of Lexington Parkway near the pedestrian bridge and Lily Pond.

The St. Paul Nagasaki Commemoration is one of a few important events strengthening Japanese ties in early August. The official Hiroshima Nagasaki Time of Remembrance will also feature a commemoration on Aug. 6 at 7:30 a.m. in the Lyndale Park Peace Garden in Minneapolis.

Perhaps the most unique opportunity for youth of all ages to engage with the commemorations is the Kids Guernica Project. Pablo Picasso's Guernica painting portrays the horrors of war. Kids Guernica champions peace and reconciliation during our present time where war is unfortunately present on multiple continents.

In this 80th anniversary year of the atomic bombs being dropped, youth in Nagasaki began work on a 10 by 17-foot mural which will be completed by children and teens here in the Twin Cities in early August before being displayed at the Aug. 8 Nagasaki Commemoration in Como.

Our community is encouraged to participate. Producing art that messages peace as part of an international, cross-cultural exchange could be an act of strength – a symbol of peaceful unity across the globe.

The painting sessions will be held on Monday, Aug. 4 and Wednesday, Aug. 6 from 4-8 p.m. at the Cha Ami Japanese Cultural Center in St. Anthony Village. For more information, contact spnscc@gmail.com. The website for the St. Paul-Nagasaki Sister City Committee is stpaulnagasaki.org.