



I interviewed Yoko Noge Dean for the March 2016 issue of the JIC's monthly newsletter. In this interview, Yoko talks about her life and the upcoming Kizuna 5 program series. An Osaka native, Yoko is co-chair for the [Osaka Committee of Chicago Sister Cities International](#), a [blues/jazz musician](#), and a [news correspondent for Nikkei America Incorporated](#). She is an ambitious woman with a unique background and perspective on life with a compassionate drive to positively impact the world.

Amy Klouse: Why have you chosen Chicago as your home?

Yoko Noge: For the music and for the people I have come to know. I visit Japan every year to tour including Osaka to also visit family. Early on, I was lucky to find a homebase to perform at called HotHouse and I played almost every Monday night there. I could create my music and be experimental, so I was lucky to perform there and gain fans. HotHouse is no longer open unfortunately but was very advanced-thinking in terms of music. It was a nonprofit organization so there was freedom to do what we liked to do and not only what sells.



AK: Were you initially drawn to Chicago because of jazz music?

YN: To be precise, I was drawn to Chicago for blues and I have been here for nearly 30 years now. I was a blues singer in Osaka. I had a band and I became a professional during college. I was supported by the record label Victor, which is famous big label in Japan (now known as JVC Kenwood

Victor Entertainment Corporation). I was a rare Japanese blues singer who sang in Osaka dialect and I toured for a while in Japan. I could not speak English very well at all at the time and when you listen to blues music it is very difficult to understand. I found out later that even Americans cannot understand music lyrics for some artists. I decided to

go to Chicago to learn more because it is the Blues Capitol. My dream was coming here to listen to real blues and understand more. I studied by listening but it is not the same as being there and learning communication through people. I decided to come when I was 26 with my ex-husband who was a Japanese blues guitar player and our goal was to go to authentic clubs that were in predominantly African American communities. We visited those areas to the West and South sides, and some of the clubs were in dangerous neighborhoods. I witnessed crimes in front of me and was even a victim at times. Those things never scared me away, I wanted to continue to listen and be in Chicago. I started a new band later with a new husband who is a jazz musician, so I expanded my repertoire. I thought jazz was just for elitists initially, but he expanded my horizons. Over the years, my Japanese side has become more prominent. When I came here, I wanted to become an African American woman and I soon realized I never could be because I was not raised in that environment growing up. You have to understand who you are. You cannot erase where you come from and who you are. I started to fuse Japanese music or what I personally know of it into blues and jazz music.

AK: When you say the Japanese influences effects your music, in what way?

YN: It's voice in my case. My voice reflects everything I have including my cultural background and experiences in Japan. Now, my voice reflects my life in America as well. Music has to have a voice, it can be an instrument or human voice, but that voice will convey emotion and who you are. Some people focus on technique, but my focus is on how to convey emotion and feelings as a human being.

AK: How did you become the Osaka Chair for Chicago Sister Cities International to begin with?

YN: It was probably about 20 years ago. I was working with Tatsu Aoki on the Chicago Asian American Jazz Festival. I met the Chair of Osaka Committee at that time and he came to my performance with several visitors from Osaka. After that, I started to talk to him and asked for his help at the Asian American Jazz Festival. He supported us and then later he asked me to join the Osaka group. Next thing I knew, he stepped down and I replaced him!

AK: You are from Osaka, correct? Have there been a lot of events and exchanges you have planned over the past 20 years in this role?

YN: Yes, I am from Osaka. For the 25th anniversary of Chicago-Osaka relations, we took Chicago jazz groups and other musicians to Osaka for the "Sound of Chicago" workshop. We have also had art events. For instance, pieces from the Art Institute of Chicago were put on display in Osaka. Here and there, we have left marks of Chicago. The next milestone anniversary between our cities will be coming up in three years and we will be preparing events for that. For the business side, my co-chair is

working in technology and wants to gather Chicago entrepreneurs to bring ideas to Osaka and hold a contest.

AK: What are you planning this year for Kizuna 5?

YN: It is an interesting year because it is the fifth year and a milestone of the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami. So we decided to do a grander scale for the event programs. The size is probably three times larger than it was for past Kizuna series (Kizuna 1-4). We decided to focus on youth and the future of Tokoku this year. Chicago is a rare city because we have had an event like this for the past five years. Not many cities are doing this and we are definitely the leading city in the US. It's difficult to continue as memories and interest continue to fade, but we keep meeting new people along the way who want to help, have connections to Japan and have passion for the event series.



(Video Message Project)

The theme of “Voices of the Youth” this year came from Aki Tohei, an English teacher and JET alumni in Fukushima. He went through the 2011 disaster while he was teaching there. Most people fled back home but he has stayed to help the Fukushima people and region recover. While the school was closed, he worked to deliver water and food to those near the site of the nuclear accident. He also did volunteer work and then he went back to the school to continue to teach once it opened. He teaches in Fukushima City at a school called Sakura no Seibo. At a previous Kizuna event, we took pictures of Chicagoans who were affected by the 2011 Earthquake and Tsunami to show the connections we share with the people of the Tohoku region. Aki Tohei was one of our subjects because we knew his mother in Chicago. When we interviewed him at that time, he said he could not leave the Fukushima people behind and that is why he decided to stay and now he is happily married to a Fukushima woman.

Last year, before Kizuna 5 started, Aki asked me "Can we send the messages of my students in Fukushima to Chicago?" We also decided it would be a good idea for students to speak in English so that the students have a trigger to study and use English. And that was the idea we used for the Kizuna 5 Video Message Project. We also quickly realized it was difficult to just receive messages from people in Fukushima City, so we made

connections elsewhere with different people in the Tohoku area. Two Kizuna team volunteers went to Tohoku this past August to recruit people to send us their video messages. It is not that easy because schools are hesitant to let children's personal information be released to the public. Most schools said no, so we needed to get help from other connections we have made over the years, and eventually other schools like ones in Kesenuma came on board. While the two Kizuna team volunteers were traveling, they were able to get 20-30 messages while they were there. That was a start! And now we have 250 video messages.

Then, we needed volunteers to do English captions because some students' English could not be easily understood and some could not speak in English at all so sent messages in Japanese. All of these had to be edited and translated with captions. Mayumi Lake from the Art Institute spearheaded the translation team and video-editing team. Luckily we had five video editors and volunteers who came on board to do translations and they came together beautifully. At the ceremony, we will select three or four video messages to project for an audience.

(Photo Exhibition)

Next, the photo exhibition. This is the main program we have been focusing on in past years and this year it is combined with the Video Messages. In other words, we asked Kiyotaka Shishido, a native of Tohoku who lives in Sendai and a documentary photographer, to do portraits that coincide with the video messages. Shishido published a highly acclaimed photo book about the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami titled *Home*. He was on board since two years ago as a volunteer-based contributing photographer who would provide photographs depending on the theme each year and this year, he has given us over 20 photographs of young people from five years old to high school aged. We decided to link the photo panel with a QR code so people can view the video messages while looking at a person's portrait. The exhibition also contains an archive of Nikkei photographs which is what we started with. Jamason Chen, the curator, traveled to Tohoku for the 2014 exhibition and some of his photos are included as well this year.

(Ceremony)

The ceremony at the Chicago Cultural Center's Preston Bradley Hall and is a very ambitious size. We wanted the ceremony to be visually rich so one of the video editors is working to make a video mosaic of 250 faces from the video messages that will be projected on a screen. Miyumi Aoki from Tsukasa Taiko will play a Japanese flute, called *yokobue*, at the start. Buddhist monk Rev. Patti Nakai will also perform a Buddhist ritual for the occasion. We will then move on to special remarks, such as those that will be given by Consul-General Iwado, as well as representatives from Mayor Emmanuel and Governor Rauner's offices, followed by a flower presentation by young children. About

50 pre-kindergartners living in Chicago will come on stage and sing "Dream" for the children and people of Tohoku. Additionally, we will show a video of elementary school students singing in a choir which is very well done. Aki Tohei overlaps the singing with photographic images of the disaster and narrates behind it in English. The cheerfulness and hope that exudes from the children is so beautiful that it makes me cry. After the video, The ceremony will end with children from Kesennuma singing "Hana wa saku" (Flowers bloom). We will then ask the audience to join in and sing together with the video. This is kind of an outline of the Kizuna event, along with the Panel Discussion at the JIC, "Creating a New Tokoku" Economic Seminar with the Japan America Society of Chicago and The 113 Project Documentary.

AK: It sounds like a wonderful event to commemorate the people of Tohoku with so much happening throughout March.



YN: It is. We also will be giving away giftcards from Level 257, a Pacman-themed restaurant and entertainment center, in Woodfield Mall. We are hoping a lot of people will gather and remember...this was an historic event that changed Japan and the world. We see how strong human beings are in the face of future uncertainty. An overwhelming number of responses we received during the video messages said they would like to help people and be useful to the world. I was amazed that these young people who have gone through such terrible things felt inspired to make a difference elsewhere. They are really mature and hardships help build character. When we support them, they give back as human beings by teaching us how to live and that's important.

AK: I think living through a disaster like this definitely makes one mature faster. And many people will never experience being in a situation like that, but it really makes you realize what power you have to help. People grow from these experiences. Along the lines of what we've been talking about, what do you hope visitors will gain from going to the Kizuna 5 events?

YN: To not forget, have a better understanding of the world, and become aware of the recovery effort in the region are important but even more important is to realize the strength of human beings. How we can rely on each other and through support, we ourselves can grow. We can learn a lot from these Japanese youth.

AK: Why and how did you start the Kizuna project to begin with?

YN: When I was in Tokyo after the earthquake in 2011, I met my friend who was at that time the Director of the Photo Department at Nikkei. He is a good friend of mine and he said that they have photo archives of the disaster. He said that programs were already in the works in London and New York and he wanted me to make arrangements in Chicago. I said okay, I will do that. I brought the idea to the Osaka Committee, it is not an Osaka issue, but Osaka is a window to Japan and I did not want to confine ourselves. We had no money, so I first talked to Ed Grant from the Japan America Society of Chicago. I said we need some money, a venue and a curator. He was our first supporter. I talked to a friend who was on the Editorial Board of the Chicago Tribune and he helped with finding Jamason Chen, our curator. I knew a lot of work would be involved, so why did I decide to go through with planning the event? That summer, my husband lost his vision. He is thirty years older than I and he has been my music partner. It was devastating for me, probably more devastating to me than when I lost my mother when I was young. So, with that devastation in my life, somehow I felt a stronger attachment to the people in Tohoku even though it is totally unrelated and not on the same scale. The feelings of loss, hurt and anxiety are all emotions I too was feeling. Helping others brings me courage.

AK: During your experiences, is there any particular challenges you have faced?

YN: Challenges in life are unavoidable. On a larger scale, I constantly ask myself what can I do for the world and how can I be useful? What is the best way for me to be in the world and for the world? These are questions I always have and sometimes wonder if there a better way to go about living my life.

AK: Do you have any quote or advice you would give to others?

YN: Take life one day at a time and live it to the fullest.