

Celebrate! The 20th Anniversary of Japan House and Matsuri in Urbana-Champaign, Illinois



*Professor Jennifer Gunji-Ballsrud,
Director of Japan House*

About Professor Jennifer Gunji-Ballsrud

Professor Jennifer Gunji-Ballsrud is the Director of [Japan House](#) at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign. She oversees all classes, programs, and activities at Japan House that are offered to students as well as the general public. Japan House is for anyone interested in gaining greater cultural understanding about Japan and for everyone who needs time for tranquility.

“I have been very near or around Japan my entire life...I was always at the original Japan House and grew up learning tea ceremony as well as many other aspects of Japanese culture.” She is the daughter of Professor Emeritus Kimiko Gunji, the former Director of Japan House, and enrolled in her mother’s classes while an undergraduate and graduate student. She also took classes under Professor Emeritus Shozo Sato who was an artist in residence at the Krannert Center who taught *kabuki* (theatre), *chanoyu* (tea ceremony), *ikebana* (flower arranging), *shodo* (calligraphy), and *sumie* (ink-wash painting).

Her Master is in Graphic Design from the University of Illinois. “I let go of graphic design a few years ago after teaching it for twelve years. Now I focus on a tea ceremony class and Japanese aesthetics class at Japan House for the college students. We even offer an online Japanese tea ceremony course!”

The Origins of Japan House

Professor Shozo Sato used to teach in a classroom designed for art and drawing but found it was difficult for him to perform tea ceremonies in the space. “In order to accommodate, Professor Sato decided to convert his own apartment into a tea house! It became extremely popular among students from all disciplines who were

interested in learning about philosophy and Japanese culture.” Dr. Morton Weir at the University soon heard about the class and thought it was remarkable. “He dedicated an old Victorian house on campus in the early 1970s to become the first Japan House. My mother was a graduate student at the time and became Professor Sato’s assistant.”



Young students performing tea ceremony in the current Japan House

In the early 1990s, the school wanted to reclaim the old Victorian home and make it an alumni center. “Professor Sato retired and my mother was left in a real sink or swim situation. The school let her know that if she raised \$2 million they would

allocate some land off campus for a Japan House. She secured more than that in the early 90's and Japan House was built in 1998.”

20th Anniversary Celebration and Matsuri

For the 20th Anniversary, students and the public are invited to the Krannert Center on Saturday, September 8. The event will commence with an opening blessing with a Shingon Buddhist priest. Performances include a koto (Japanese harp) group from Toho Gakuen in Japan with a teacher and students, contemporary tsugaru-jamisen by Michiyoshi Sato, Ho Etsu Taiko drums and more! Kimono expert Ms. Kasada will dress participants in kimono and Seiran Chiba, a large-scale calligrapher, will be the grand finale. Since the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami, Ms. Chiba has visited temporary homes to bring art and uplift spirits. In the evening there will be an “East meets Midwest” dinner with American and Japanese female chefs.

Another event spearheaded by Gunji-Ballsrud is the annual Matsuri that started four years ago. This year's event will be on Sunday, September 9. “So many cities have their own Japan Festivals. I decided it was time for Urbana-Champaign

to have one to introduce the community to Japan in a fun, engaging, and educational way.”

At the Matsuri, the Buddhist priest will have a fire ceremony as part of Shingon sect practices and perform blessings on Japan House. All performers from the night before will also have demonstrations at the Matsuri. There will be a concert with [Shonen Knife and The 5.6.7.8's](#) and the event will conclude with fireworks in traditional Matsuri style.



From the Japan House Matsuri in 2016

Japan House and the Community

There is a vibrant community in Urbana-Champaign both on and off campus with many individuals and organizations that support Japan House. There are currently four staff members with several student interns and volunteers for events. When Gunji-Ballsrud took over as Director seven years ago, she sought to make Japan House more readily accessible to everyone and not just the school community. “I wanted to broaden the scope of what we offer and one area I focused on was Japanese food and drink culture.” She partners with local small businesses to have events like sake tastings at different venues.

One of the most well-known advocates for Japan House is actor Nick Offerman. “He took *kabuki* and attributes his acting success to Professor Sato...Professor Sato took him under his wing and helped develop his thinking and mentality. He also brought him with to Japan several times for performances. Offerman’s hobby is woodworking and he built an *azumaya* (traditional pavilion found in Japanese gardens) in honor of Professor Sato.” While he is unable to join for the 20th Anniversary Celebration, he will be there in December for another event.



Azumaya in honor of Professor Shozo Sato

Japan House in the Future

Gunji-Ballsrud plans to expand Japan House in the future. “We were approved to open an Annex in 2021 by the University as long as we raise \$3.2 million. I have secured \$3 million so far...we are almost there!” The expansion is necessary because currently they are unable to hold classes or events simultaneously. “There will be an authentic tea room and a matcha café in the Annex.”

All of Japan House’s activities and the expansion are 100% funded by donations. They are affiliated with the University of Illinois from an engagement standpoint but they are not financed by the school. “We are so appreciative of the generous support from our donors!”

This interview was conducted and written by JIC Staff Member Amy Klouse.