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Remembering Arnold Perl

By Kanzi Takayama

On February 26th, 2020, we welcomed the inaugural visit of Consul General Kayoko Fukushima to Memphis. Arnold took pride and pleasure in welcoming incoming consul generals of Japan, and he always wanted to be the first one to greet them on behalf of the City of Memphis.

On this particular occasion, he was delighted to meet Consul General Fukushima and introduce her to Mayor Jim Strickland in his office. A luncheon honoring Consul General Fukushima at the Greater Memphis Chamber followed, with the “triple header” visit concluding at Arnold’s own office. It was fitting that Arnold’s office, where so many conversations about the future of the Japan-Memphis relationship had always taken place, would be the last stop on the Consul General’s first visit to Memphis. It is where Arnold invited my fellow JAST Board Member Joe Durante and me whenever we brainstormed and developed strategies for fundraising, and also where he hosted countless Japan-related seminars and receptions, including a 2018 JETRO special economic report.

Sadly, the Consul General’s visit was the last time many of us saw Arnold in person. Shortly after the meeting, Memphis enacted “Safer at Home” sheltering due to COVID-19, and future interactions were limited to telephone conversations.

In retrospect, it was fitting that what may possibly have been Arnold’s last official role was to represent the Japan-America Society of Tennessee as its founder. At those meetings, he repeated Mayor Strickland’s encouraging words, “The best is yet to come.” He was very optimistic about the future of the relationship between Japan and the US, particularly Memphis, even when we were losing key investments. In fact, it was Arnold who had convinced Mayor Strickland to embrace the Memphis Japan Festival as its key partner just two years prior.

Personally, I had known Arnold for many years, probably more than two decades, and we enjoyed occasional business meetings during which he was always courteous and pleasant, before a dramatic shift in our relationship came along in the aftermath of the

Japanese government's decision to open the Consulate-General of Japan in Nashville and to assign Consul General Hiroshi Sato to the post in 2008. When Arnold and Sato-san met, the connection and chemistry between them were immediate; a new partnership built on mutual respect and admiration was born. That's when the activity level around Memphis really started hopping.

Soon, upon the advice of Consul General Sato, we were jointly planning a trip to New York to meet with the Japanese Chamber of Commerce. A Memphis delegation comprised of Mayor A C Wharton, John Moore, Mark Herbison, Arnold, and me met with several top executives of Japanese corporations and held a dinner meeting with one of the largest Japanese investments in Memphis at that time.

Shortly thereafter in 2009, we held a sustainable energy conference at University of Memphis at which Arnold moderated panels that featured high profile speakers from Sharp Electronics and Nissan, as well as Consul General Sato and Tennessee's Commissioner of Economic & Community Development. He was especially ecstatic when the event made the front-page newspaper headline, overshadowing an article about a competing Chamber event on that same date.

He told me during one of our trips together that JAST was closest to his heart among all the high-profile leadership roles he held, and founding of JAST was one of his proudest accomplishments.

And so it was that after years of heavy lifting for the Memphis and Shelby County Airport Authority and the FedEx forum, Arnold returned his attention to JAST. He told me during one of our trips together that JAST was closest to his heart among all the high-profile leadership roles he held, and founding of JAST was one of his proudest accomplishments.

Arnold enjoyed playing golf with Japanese golfers and was thoroughly amused by learning quirky side games that Japanese typically play. His appetite for Japanese cuisine returned as well. He already had a keen appreciation of Japanese food, but he also had a childlike curiosity that led him to inquire constantly about ingredients, cooking

methods, and the proper way to eat the particular delicacy. All in all, we worked hard, played hard, and ate really well

Arnold was constantly searching for new avenues to attract new Japanese investment to Memphis, to engage in meaningful conversations with Japanese companies, and to bring American and Japanese communities together. Whenever I accompanied him, his focus was always on Japan and Japanese companies, and he was always receptive to my suggestions for Japan-related programs. He had an uncanny ability to make my own ideas even better than I could have envisioned.

Another pivotal point came about four years ago, nearly a decade after the Consulate General of Japan relocated from New Orleans to Nashville.

It was 2017, and JAST was launching its own Memphis Japan Festival at the Memphis Botanic Garden. While Arnold was impressed with the Festival's inaugural success of 6,000 in attendance, his influence was most keenly felt as the Festival was challenged by the loss of its title sponsor the second year. By then Arnold was clearly committed to the project and applied to the challenge his lifelong guiding principal: Passion and Simplicity.

In no short order, Joe Durante and I received marching orders from Arnold and three of us soon met Mayor Strickland in his office. In less than an hour, The City of Memphis was the title sponsor of not just the Memphis Japan Festival, but the city was the sponsor of an expanded Memphis Japan Week.

And yet, Arnold was far from finished. Memphis Japan Week consisted of three events: the festival, the golf tournament, and one special event that involved a Memphis premier showing of the full feature movie, "Persona Non Grata" compliments of The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. It is the story of Chiune Sugihara, a young Japanese diplomat serving in Lithuania, who was later called the Japanese "Schindler."

With full confidence, Arnold took the helm of the film premier project and recruited Temple Israel and the Memphis area Jewish community to make resources available, including an opening ceremony with remarks from the newly assigned Consul General Kobayashi and a lecture and blessing by Rabbi Micah Greenstein. The sold out premier, which required two screens of a major movie theater, was a resounding success.

What is so remarkable about this period in Arnold's life was that he had already begun receiving treatments at MD Anderson in Houston every 28 days. And yet, his resilience, commitment and understanding of humanity continued to impress us all. Rabbi Greenstein even mentioned this episode in his thoughtful and powerful eulogy at Arnold's funeral service.

As I continue to reflect on Arnold's friendship and his many successes, one secret to success was his ability to create a very powerful and effective team and to lead them with a contagious enthusiasm. He poured his immense passion into every project.

It is hard for us to accept that his illustrious journey has come to an end. For those of us who were fortunate to take part in it, however, it was an incredible experience to learn from a master problem solver how to overcome seemingly insurmountable challenges. I was certainly honored to be by his side, sometimes as his partner and equal. He was a patient teacher, a gentle mentor, and a kind friend. I am forever blessed with his generous and genuine friendship. As our hearts feel a profound loss at his passing, we must now ask the question - how shall we carry on his legacy?