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AFWJ celebrates 50 years of uniting women

Members of the Association of Foreign Wives of Japanese reflect on the group's achievements

The Foreign Element

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In the summer of 1969, Beverly Nakamura had only been married a few weeks when she read about Joan Itoh, a fellow American living with a Japanese husband in Niigata Prefecture. Itoh had written in to The Japan Times' popular columnist Jean Pearce, hoping to connect with others in similar situations.

This was in an era where overseas travel was still an expensive luxury for the majority of people, and not all households in Japan even had a phone yet.

"I was amazed to hear about Joan, but didn't write in as I was just getting settled into our first little house in Tokyo," says Nakamura, who met her husband while attending university in Japan. "But then Jean Pearce's second announcement about a luncheon at TAC (the Tokyo American Club) in September really caught my attention."

Little did Nakamura know that this event would be the catalyst for the launching of AFWJ (the Association of Foreign Wives of Japanese), a nationwide organization that marks its half-century anniversary this month.

Nakamura, who has just celebrated her 50th wedding anniversary and is now based in Yokohama, has been an active member from the outset.

Attendees had not been asked to RSVP for that first meeting in 1969, so everyone was surprised when around 50 women showed up at TAC. Nakamura still clearly remembers how one Colombian woman burst into tears, overwhelmed at meeting other native speakers of Spanish in Japan.

The excited participants didn't want the event to end, and concerned Japanese husbands started calling TAC, wondering why their wives hadn't come home yet. Nakamura recalls how staff taking the calls would come into the room looking for a "Mrs. Sato," for example. "Seeing all the foreign faces, they immediately assumed there was no 'Mrs. Sato' there and left. We were quite amused!" she says, smiling at the memory.

All welcome
Japan's rise in the global economy and the birth of the internet have contributed to making things easier for non-Japanese. Even so, there are still many potential cross-cultural pitfalls for those who settle here as the partner of a Japanese national, and in a society with specific expectations and attitudes



Beverly Nakamura

about gender and familial roles, life may be particularly challenging for women.

Such women in Japan are by no means a monolithic entity and experiences and needs vary widely. Today AFWJ has around 500 members throughout Japan, as well as some overseas. While the group's primary language of communication is English, 37 nationalities are currently represented among AFWJ's members.

The organization has grown and kept pace with the times, and, despite the name, members now include those who are separated, divorced, widowed or cohabitating.

along with foreign women in same-sex partnerships with Japanese nationals. The heart of the organization's activities are regular meet-ups with others living in the same vicinity and the annual national convention, while a self-published quarterly journal and a strong online presence serve to link everyone together regardless of location.

An integral part of AFWJ's success throughout the decades is the input of the volunteers who help to run the group at both national and district level. The current president is Norma Bartruff, an American living in Tokyo.

"Certainly having a structure — a board, constitution, quarterly magazine and social media outlets — in place to delineate who and what the group is for is very helpful in keeping AFWJ members connected and the group active," Bartruff says. "But the fact that

it's a group run by and for women, and the continued need for this support, is what keeps AFWJ moving forward."

Community support

AFWJ's convention is a much-anticipated event for many members. Typically running from Friday evening to Sunday afternoon, it is hosted by a different district each year and brings members together from all over Japan — and even overseas. Part school reunion, part self-development weekend, members can attend workshops conducted by both their peers and outside experts, visit local attractions, discuss and share experiences on issues of mutual importance and simply kick back in an environment where, for once, nobody worries about being the only "gaijin" in the room.

This year's convention takes place in Tokyo from Sept. 6 to 8 and includes a gala dinner at the Tokyo American Club, bringing AFWJ back to the scene of the very first gathering. The founder, now known as Joan Itoh Burk and based in Canada, is flying in to join the celebrations.

"The yearly convention is a huge plus for me. I love seeing people that I only get the chance to meet once a year," says Laura Marushima, an Australian living in Clifton and the current AFWJ vice president. "I also love the fact that I could go to practically anywhere in Japan and put out a mes-



Norma Bartruff



Laura Marushima

Birds of feather: Members of the Association of Foreign Wives of Japanese at a recent Kanto District event.

YOSHIE HIDEOKA

sage saying 'I'm heading here, who lives close by?' and know that someone will step up and say 'me'."

Despite the recent growth in online resources for foreign nationals in Japan, members of AFWJ firmly believe in the value of being paid up members of such an organization.

"It is very easy to feel isolated here. Japanese people are generally kind and friendly, but they have a very strong sense of national identity and differentiate themselves from those who are not Japanese," says Bartruff. "It can be hard to keep a sense of self. AFWJ provides a lot of opportunity for good social relationships."

Nakamura agrees. "The era in the beginning years of AFWJ was one of isolation for foreign wives in Japan," she says. "Now, even though electronic communication has shrunk the world and travel costs have gone down greatly, women still love to get together and talk and share their lives, and the structure of AFWJ still allows that to happen."

Activities are planned within each district based on the interests and needs of the members. These may include coffee mornings, nights out, holiday parties, playgroups for kids, family camps, retreats and hikes. With the rise in the use of social media, it has become much easier to organize informal gatherings, too. A member may post online about a lecture, concert or professional development opportunity, and it then becomes a chance to gather with AFWJ friends at the event.

While face-to-face gatherings are still at

the heart of activities, AFWJ has a variety of online groups to suit the situations and interests of members, mostly on Facebook these days. The online forums can provide a safe space for letting off steam, as well as a community for those seeking advice on any aspect of life. This may include broaching sensitive and serious issues, ranging from school bullying and infertility, to mental health and coping with aging parents abroad.

"There are so many other groups out there if you look only at the online aspect. But there is so much more to AFWJ than just the online groups; it really is a community that would still exist — and did — without the internet," says Marushima.

Being part of a strong community means that AFWJ members can support each other through ups and downs, and Marushima says this aspect offers an extra level of comfort to the online experience.

"It just feels safer that people who actually know me can share in not only my difficulties but also in my joy," she explains.

The focus of the organization remains firmly centered on helping members lead successful and fulfilling lives in Japan, but this has a residual effect on their communities, too.

"We are living here and participating in all aspects of Japanese society — from school PTA meetings for our children, to working in all categories of employment, volunteering in charity organizations and becoming entrepreneurs running our own businesses," says Nakamura. "I like to think that our having participated in society for the past half century, in many corners of Japan, has built bridges and understanding of the point of normalizing our presence in the community."

Other activities

AFWJ also sees as a resource by the media and researchers, and it is the role of PR Coordinator Heather Fukase to manage requests or inquiries. According to Fukase, an Australian who lives in Nagano, the requests from Japanese TV and other media often focus on stereotypical aspects of international marriage.

For example, "Please (find someone to) cook a traditional dish in a traditional costume, while teaching their culture to an amazed and appreciative family," or "Please help us contact a foreign wife living here for less than five years from a non-Asian country who argues with her husband over raising their children; 'Um... no thank you,'" she quips.

"AFWJ has, however, also been able to help numerous researchers and graduate students to collect data, and source interviewees on a variety of issues relating to international marriage and the lives of foreign women in Japan," Fukase says. "A lot has changed, with technology playing an increasing role in communication between our group and the outside world."

Amid many changes in Japan over the past half century, Bartruff notes that the basic need to feel connected with people is still the same.

"In general, people who manage to live in foreign cultures successfully are more open to change and differing opinions about the world. I feel this is absolutely true of the women in AFWJ," she says. "These women are like a second family to me and, like family, they are very close to my heart."

For more information about AFWJ, visit www.afwj.org