

Vocational Students and International Education

An EAA Interview with United States–Japan Foundation Elgin Heinz Prizewinner Robert Clavelle



Robert Clavelle (right) and Ms. Masako Ozono, President of the Ōnojō City International Exchange Association (left).

Robert (Bob) Clavelle is the Instructor of the Building Trades Program at the Hartford Area Career and Technology Center in White River Junction, Vermont. He has a strong passion for Japan, its people, and culture. In the summer of 2000, he was provided an opportunity to be a participant in the University of Vermont's Asian Studies Outreach Program Institute in Japan, a three-week study program funded by the United States–Japan Foundation (USJF) with a focus on learning Japanese culture and bringing it back to the classroom. In 2004, he created the US Japan Technical Education Study Program, where American students work side by side with their Japanese peers in the career pathways of construction, computer technology, media arts, and industrial mechanics.

Upon completion of the 2005 program, Clavelle was the recipient of the University of Vermont's Asian Studies Outreach Program's Excellence in International Education Award. The program was halted due to the economic slowdown of 2008, but Clavelle received support and from the USJF in 2011 to travel to Japan and reestablish the program. In 2013, he established US Japan Technical Connections Inc. and received nonprofit status in fall 2014. The organization runs the US Japan Career and Cultural Study Program, and the 2016 summer program was the fourth since the creation of the nonprofit.

Over the past few years, Clavelle has established a strong working relationship with the Ōnojō City International Exchange Association (OCIEA). In 2014, they collaborated on a grant from the US-Japan Council's Tomodachi Initiative and had the first program in Vermont for students from Ōnojō City. The program will continue in 2016 with the OCIEA Career and Cultural Study Program. Robert Clavelle was one of two winners of the 2016 USJF-sponsored Elgin Heinz Award for excellence in teaching about Japan.

Lucien: *Bob, congratulations again on a well-deserved award, and thanks for doing this interview. Please give our readers a brief overview about your early life experiences and what or who first caused you to become interested in Japan.*

Bob: I am a native Vermonter and grew up in the city of Winooski, which borders Vermont's largest city, Burlington. I was the youngest of six children, and my father was a meat cutter. After raising five sons and a daughter, my mother worked as a bridal consultant.

Early on in my life, I worked in construction and began teaching the subject in 1984. In 1989, I started my own business focusing on cabinet-making and woodworking but returned to teaching in 1994. In my class, I work with students building an energy-efficient house over a two-year period. The house is then placed on the open market and sold at fair market value. My teaching schedule also allows me to build and grow my nonprofit.

How did I become interested in Japan? Honestly, I kind of stumbled into it. It was Christmas night in 1999, and we were having dinner at my sister's house. Bill Williams, a good friend of the family, was the then-state consultant for the University of Vermont's Asian Studies Outreach Program. In a casual conversation, he informed me about one of their programs, called the Institute in Japan, and explained how the program enabled Vermont teachers to go to Japan for a three-week study program, with the objective being to have them return and incorporate what they learned into their

respective curricula. He asked me if I would be interested in participating and I said, "Sure, why not? I have never been to Japan and never really given much thought about going, but it sounds interesting." So I began reading about Japan, especially Japanese construction techniques. I attended University of Vermont Japan workshops and purchased a couple of language CDs. The Asian Studies Outreach Center provided me with my host family's information, and I began communicating with them via email.

Lucien: *From reading the USJF biography of you at their website, it appears that during your first trip to Japan in 2000, you developed what seems to be a special friendship with Dr. and Mrs. Fujinaga. How did this relationship develop, and how has it influenced you personally and professionally?*

Bob: Two days after arriving in Japan, I met the Fujinagas, who were my host family for the next nineteen days. At the time, they were in their mid-sixties. Dr. Fujinaga could speak very good English, and his wife, Koko, could speak English well enough that we could easily communicate. They had spent two years in the US in Houston, where Dr. Fujinaga did his medical residency. During my program, our days were spent mainly in the Osaka area, visiting schools, attending workshops, and participating in cultural activities. At night, the Fujinagas and I would sit at the kitchen table enjoying Japanese food, which Koko prepared. Sipping on sake or a cold beer or two, we would talk for hours. They taught me so much about Japan's culture, history, and language. Fujinaga-sensei gave me a great book about Japanese culture and its traditions, and I also talked

with them about Vermont and my family. Over the years, they had hosted many people from all over the world but said that they felt the most comfortable having me at their home. Of course, being typical Japanese, they showered me with gifts to the point they bought me a suitcase so I could carry them all home. One of the things that brought us closer together was that they were so much like my real parents, who always opened their home and welcomed people with open arms, whether they were friends of ours or strangers. My parents' and the Fujinagas' kindness both seemed endless and unconditional.

In 2001, they traveled to Vermont with four friends. Since that initial visit, the Fujinagas have come back to Vermont twice: in 2005 and in 2014. When I returned to Japan, the Fujinagas arranged all my travel plans within the country. They took me to Kanazawa, Fukuoka, Kyoto, and Tokyo, never allowing me to open my wallet for anything, including accommodations. Every year I have taken students to Japan. Mrs. Fujinaga has traveled to Fukuoka to have lunch with the group and presented each student and chaperone with a kimono. Even at the age of seventy-eight, she traveled to Fukuoka again this past summer to meet the students.

When I went to Japan during the 2007 New Year season, I spent New Year's Eve with them. When I woke up New Year's Day, Dr. Fujinaga presented me with a red envelope containing 10,000 yen. When I asked them why they gave it to me, Dr. Fujinaga said that it is a Japanese tradition to give your children a gift or money for the New Year. They told me I was their American son. Another time, they mailed a Christmas gift of chopsticks, a tea cup, and a small rice bowl to my youngest daughter. They signed the card "from your Japanese grandparents." To this day, we talk on the phone on a regular basis, averaging at least once a month. At eighty-one, Dr. Fujinaga is still working full time but has plans of retiring. Mrs. Fujinaga is always giving advice on what I should be doing with my program, just as a mother would do. They inspired me to start my program and have always been there to support me.

Lucien: *What factors motivated you in 2004 to create the US Japan Technical Education Program, and what were, in your opinion, some of the major accomplishments of the program?*

Bob: Inspiration for this unique organization and its programs grew out of my desire to help American technical education students develop connections with their counterparts in Japan. As a nation with long-standing traditions in craftsmanship and technical innovation, Japan has a wealth of experience and knowledge for technical education students and students on similar career paths. Opportunities for bridging American and Japanese technological areas of expertise are vast. Automotive and mechanical industries, medical professions, culinary arts careers, computer technology development, traditional and modern building construction techniques, graphic illustration and animation, fashion design, and natural resources are some of the courses of study in US technology centers that easily lend themselves to international exchange.

After my second trip to Japan in 2002, I became fascinated with Japanese culture, traditions, construction techniques, and craftsmanship. I felt that study in Japan would be an excellent fit in a program for high school technical education students. As I began to do some research, I found that there were no Japan-related programs for students in technical education courses. With that, I began to discuss my idea with the Fujinagas and with Megumi Hiramatsu, a travel counselor with Japan Travel Bureau (JTB) Global, whom I met when I first went to Japan in 2000. With their help and assistance from their friends and contacts, in 2003, I visited four technical schools in search of one that would be interested in developing some sort of exchange program. The schools were located in Tokyo, Kanazawa, Osaka, and Fukuoka. The Fukuoka School of Technology accepted my proposal, and this was the beginning of the US Japan Technical Education Study Program.

In my opinion, some of the major accomplishments of the US Japan Technical Education Study Program were:

1. It was the first, and I believe still the only, program for technical education students in both the United States and Japan.
2. It was created by a building construction teacher with a desire and mission to provide the opportunity to students who otherwise would not even consider experiencing Japan.
3. The program transitioned from a school-based to a career work experience-based program in 2013. Some of the challenges that I faced were the bureaucracy and the frustration of working with the public education system in Japan, along with the differences in school calendars. These two factors made it extremely difficult to develop some kind of exchange program. Also, in Japan, public school principals are considered public officials, and usually they only stay at a school for two years before moving to another position within government. This made it nearly impossible to develop meaningful relationships for an exchange type of program.
4. Over the years of providing this opportunity to technical high school students, I have only increased the cost to each student by \$250. In 2004, the cost to each student was \$1,500. This year, it is \$1,750. Why so inexpensive? My program targets a group of students who may not have the financial means to experience a foreign travel/exchange program. My philosophy has always been, and will continue to be, "If a student truly wants to experience Japan and its culture, money should not stand in the way. It should not be a free ride, but affordable enough that any student should be able to participate." I could increase the cost and make it comparable to other exchange programs, but then I would eliminate the population of students that I wish to serve.
5. The connection with the Ōnojō City International Exchange Association (OCIEA) and the creation of the OCIEA Career and Cultural Study Program in Vermont. This program provides students from Ōnojō City an opportunity to participate in a work experience in Vermont, and will now be entering its third year.

Lucien: *I know that the 2008 economic crash placed your program on hold, but thanks in part to USJF support, and even more to your hard work and entrepreneurial talents, in 2011, you began a new version of your original program that now is named the US Japan Career and Cultural Study Program. What are similarities and differences between the two programs you created, and what are some of your future aspirations for the program?*

Bob: I received an email from the USJF encouraging me to restart my program, and they provided support for me to travel back to Fukuoka and reestablish it. At that point, I did not have 501(c)(3) nonprofit status, so the White River Rotary Club agreed to be the recipient of any grant monies until I received my nonprofit status. This was achieved in November 2014.

There are very few similarities between the two programs, and there are three areas that I believe make the new version stand apart from my original vision:

1. The relationship that has been developed with the OCIEA: In 2012, a representative from the US Consulate in Fukuoka Prefecture introduced us to OCIEA officials. Since that time, our organizations have developed a great working relationship with the same mission. We have worked together on grants and providing our students with meaningful learning opportunities. They arrange all the host families for my students, as well as cultural activities that truly immerse the students in Japanese culture. Our strong respect and relationship are evident in the fact that OCIEA President Mrs. Masako Ozono traveled to Vermont when I was presented the Elgin Heinz Award in May.
- We collaborated on a grant to the US-Japan Council's Tomodachi Initiative, which was instrumental in the creation of the student program in Vermont. This relationship and friendship have brought to

fruition one of my original visions of establishing an exchange program, but in a much different way. My original vision was between two technical high schools. I never imagined it would be based around career work experiences.

2. Social media: As much as I hate to love it or love to hate it, social media has provided a whole new dimension to the program. It has provided, not just for me, but students from both sides, along with staff and families, the ability to continue to build upon the friendships that are developed. In the earlier years of the programs, students would leave Japan, and communication with the folks that they met were challenging and poor at best. Now they can easily message, text, Skype, FaceTime, and call at little to no expense and inconvenience, which has enhanced relationships. The world is now connected with a push of a button, and as an educator and President of US Japan Technical Connections, it is my responsibility to teach and encourage students to use it as a tool to build upon the friendships that have been made.
3. The network of friends and contacts that have been developed over the years: This has allowed students enhanced experiences in Japan, which provide them with true cultural understanding and mutual respect. Most businesses have hosted students several times now, along with many of the host families. This creates a very friendly and comfortable atmosphere for the students and staff.

Lucien: *There seems to be strong evidence that your Japan work has fundamentally altered the lives of young people who don't ordinarily have international education opportunities. Will you please share a few stories about students whose lives were significantly changed by their Japan experiences?*

Bob: The first one who comes to mind is a student named Dylan, who participated in the 2007 program and did his career work experience with a traditional residential construction company. It was not long into his work experience that the owner recognized Dylan's true interest and desire to learn more about traditional Japanese construction techniques. Prior to returning to Vermont, Dylan was invited back to Japan by the owner, who is a master carpenter, to study traditional Japanese carpentry. In October of 2008, I arranged for Dylan to return to Japan to study carpentry for three months. During those three months, not only did he study carpentry, but he also developed long-lasting friendships. To this day, Dylan continues to be in regular contact with the many friends he made. Now, at the age of twenty-five, he is the Shop Manager for the Rocky Mountain Barrel Company, handcrafting barrel furniture. He has stated to me on several occasions that the two experiences in Japan gave him the confidence and the ambition to travel through the US and settle in Colorado. Without the opportunity to travel to Japan, Dylan said he is not sure he would be where he is today. Dylan reports that his Japan opportunity was a truly life-changing experience.

Chris, a participant in the 2006 program, was entering his senior year in the culinary arts program at the Hartford Tech Center. He and two other students were the first to be involved in a career work experience in a traditional high-end Japanese restaurant in the Akasaka District of Fukuoka, and he learned the basics of Japanese cuisine. On his last day, the owner told Chris that if he ever wanted to come back and study Japanese cooking, he would welcome him to his restaurant. During his senior year, Chris studied Japanese language and worked to save enough money to go over for three months. An internship was arranged, and Chris returned to Japan in the fall of 2007. He got a true taste of what it was like to work in a Japanese restaurant, with his day starting at 10:00 a.m. and ending around midnight. Chris did a homestay with his 2006 family and would ride a bike thirty minutes to and from work. I visited Chris toward the end of his internship, and after work, we talked with the restaurant's head chef and his wife, who also worked there. The wife was saddened with Chris's internship coming to an end, and she said that he brought so much happiness

to them. To this day, Chris continues to stay in contact with his restaurant friends, along with his host family. Chris still maintains a strong desire to return and study more Japanese cuisine. Now one of the top chefs at the famous Woodstock Inn in Vermont, he attributes his experiences in Japan to his success in the culinary business.

Another student, Jessica, is now doing a semester abroad at Waseda University in Tokyo. In January 2013, her father contacted me to see if Jessica could be a participant in the program. Though she was not a technical center student, she had a strong interest in Japan and learning the Japanese language. I arranged for her to study Japanese as her career work experience in the program. Her experience in Japan solidified her desire to major in Japanese at the University of Vermont. Her career goal is to become an interpreter. Her father has approached me on several occasions to tell me that going to Japan has given Jessica the experience and confidence to pursue her career in Japanese language and to study abroad in Japan. While over there this summer, Jessica traveled to Fukuoka, stayed with her 2013 host family, helped out the program, and saw many of the friends she had made. The relationship with her host family has become a special one, as they email on a regular basis, and her family hosted her Japanese family at their house last summer.

There are so many more examples that I could share, but I know you only asked for a few!

Lucien: *What, in your opinion, might be some ways that other educators might provide international educational opportunities for secondary school and community college technical education students?*

Bob: Tough question! First of all, in a world connected through technology and social media, now more than ever is the time to look at increasing cultural understanding and mutual respect as a part of our teaching in schools. With school budgets under tight scrutiny and cuts, international education has taken a hit.

In regards to some ways that other educators might provide international opportunities, it really is based on the educator's interest. I believe that applied learning experiences with immersion offers the best educational value. My experience in Japan has taught me that building relationships is the key component to a successful program. It's taken a lot of effort, patience, and understanding, but the benefits far outweigh the effort needed. For technical students, either secondary or postsecondary, there are vast opportunities to provide international education experiences, as this has really been uncharted territory. Applied learning opportunities abroad also tend to lessen the language barrier, since so much of the communication is visual. One of the goals of my nonprofit is to provide secondary and postsecondary technical educational institutions with services that would assist in establishing an international educational experience, specifically with Japan. This could involve a two- or three-week career work experience, as well as short- and/or long-term internships. Services would provide help in establishing program goals and objectives, curriculum materials, networking, and information in regards to what can and cannot work.

To any educator who might be considering international experiences for students, I would advise the following:

1. The main objective must have true educational value that promotes cultural understanding and mutual respect, rather than being a sight-seeing trip.
2. Develop long-term goals and outcomes.
3. Have patience, as these types of programs take time to develop.
4. Keep an open mind with a passion for what you are trying to accomplish.
5. Finally, start small and allow it to grow from there.

Lucien: *Bob, thanks for the interview! ■*