

Friendship is a pathway to peace

by By Irene Kai and David Wick For the Tidings
Friday, June 14th 2019



One of many musical groups that played for Ashland visitors to Guanajuato, Mexico.

A foreign language professor at Southern Oregon College (currently SOU) took a group of students on a bus trip to Guanajuato, Mexico, every year in the 1960s to learn Spanish and the Mexican culture.

In 1969, Chela Tapp-Kocks established a sister school relationship with Southern Oregon College and the University of Guanajuato. She also established the sister city relationship with the mayors of Guanajuato and Ashland. The Amigo Club was born. During the past 50 years, Ashland has formed a wonderful and close relationship with Guanajuato. Students flow between the two universities, faculty and city officials visit both cities, there are marriages between students, and some of Señora Chela's students

from Guanajuato went on to become a governor, minister of economics and officers of the Mexican government.

In April of this year, 50 people from Guanajuato with their mayor, city council members, faculty from the university and the president of the Peace Commission visited Ashland. During their stay, they visited the World Peace Flame Monument at the Thalden Pavilion. The mayor of Guanajuato was so inspired by this iconic symbol of peace in Ashland that he asked if Ashland Culture of Peace Commission would assist him to install a World Peace Flame in Guanajuato. This would be the first World Peace Flame in Latin America. He invited us to visit Guanajuato with the Ashland delegation the following month to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the sister city relationship.

When we arrived in Guanajuato, we were embraced as if we were family members. The warmth and open-heartedness was immediate. During our stay, we learned so much about the beauty, history, art and culture of the people and the city, especially the heartfelt closeness of the 50-year relationship everyone held dear. Wherever we went, we were serenaded by music and showered with affection. The week-long celebration was packed with programs from 8 a.m. to 11 p.m. daily.

One of the programs that was requested by the mayor of Guanajuato was having a peace ceremony conducted by ACPC at the Plaza de la Paz, the Peace Plaza in the center of the city, in order to set the intention to bring the World Peace Flame to Guanajuato in the near future. Irene brought the candle she lit from the original World Peace Flame in Wales and gifted it to their city. The mayor lit the candle with a young school girl, a symbolic gesture of passing peace to the next generation. Most nations' history is recorded by periods of war. At this gathering, we were writing history for our next generation, our commitment to peace. Ashland proclaimed itself a city of peace May 16, 2017. We also guided Guanajuato to join the International Cities of Peace after the ceremony.

Why is friendship important? As we know, long-term friendship builds a strong bond, especially one for 50 years. We see each other face to face, share our joy and challenges of our children, grandchildren and life in general. We inspire and lift each other up when times are tough, and we go out having a grand time just enjoying each other, as well. There is no difference between personal friendship and a sister cities relationship. It's only on a different scale. As with most things of value, this is an investment with a return on investment on many levels. Strong bonds between cities may become a saving grace in the world.

The University of Guanajuato and SOU share knowledge and encourage students to immerse in different cultures. When they are exposed to something new, they tend to be open to learning in a safe environment instead of being fearful and lashing out. They will become better global citizens with a bigger capacity of tolerance.

When city officials share ideas on how to manage and govern, through open dialogue of friendship, the conversations become instructive and valued.

At this time, there is such a lack of civility in our daily interactions on all levels, and personal attacks have become the normal course of dialogue. The deep friendship between Guanajuato and Ashland deserves to be nurtured and cherished. Like in any family, we are teaching our children how to build good relationships.

When Guanajuato installs the World Peace Flame, Ashland and Guanajuato will be the first sister cities in the world with sister World Peace Flames.

Irene Kai and David Wick are co-founders of the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission, ashlandcpc.org.