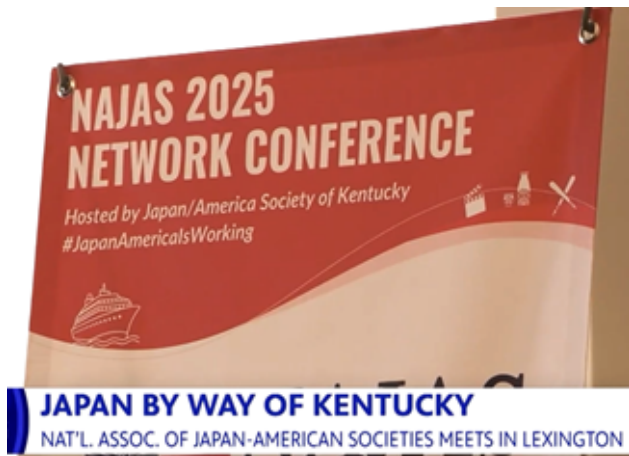


Read ALL About It!

2025 NAJAS Network Conference Highlights

Organized by NAJAS, Hosted by JAS/Kentucky, Majority-funded by JFNY & Japanet America



Over 300 joined, a cruise company and a Nagoya band buoyed our spirits, and KET TV covered us live!

The nation's coalition of Japan-related non-profits, public institutions, and dozens of firms gathered in late-August in Lexington, Kentucky, to showcase and draw energy from the grassroots of a relationship that has “grown like a weed” -- rapidly, resiliently, across every sort of field -- over eight decades.

Mid-2025 was an important moment for us to come together in numbers and with vigor. The **National Association of Japan-America Societies (NAJAS)** and its member society-host, the **Japan/America Society of Kentucky (JASK)** met the moment with a resounding success for US-Japan partnership. This blog summarizes our talks,

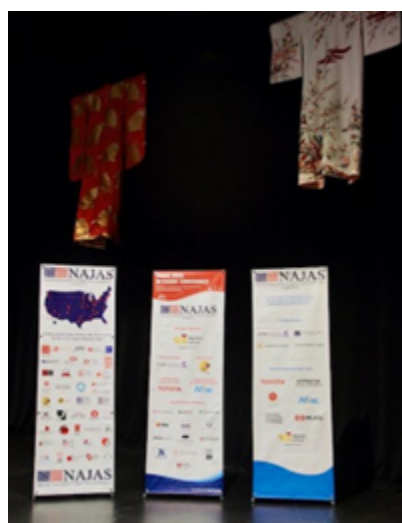
takeaways -- and fun -- over August 20-22. NAJAS' August 27 press release of conference outcomes, the agenda, and other resources, are accessible as links at the end of the text.

1. Bottom Lines Up Front:

Vital Grassroots: The civil society ecosystem — anchored in a community of societies and other non-profits and foundations — remains fully engaged in promoting the broad, vibrant and diverse elements that bind the United States and Japan. There was an appetite on display in Lexington to come together for this fully subscribed Conference. NAJAS hit records in participation and levels of (analog) animation. Buddies were rediscovered, new work streams surfaced, and alliances forged.



Fallout within the Bilateral: Official dealings between Washington and Tokyo, particularly around tariffs, have uncentered economic ties and created ripple impacts in other domains of the relationship. An element of imprecision and unpredictability will continue with uncertain mid-term implications for business on both sides of the Pacific (and globally). Electoral impact in both countries cannot be discounted. We heard that a hedging strategy is likely from Tokyo (and other capitals) as they adjust or diversify diplomatic and security lines, but this does not, seemingly, portend rupture in economic flows or alliance architecture. Fresh approaches and attention to lingering relationship irritants are positives of the departure from norms. In tumult, opportunity.



Proactivity, please! Conference sessions that touched upon the engagement of youth in societies, supporting career tracks, redefining NFP missions, and adapting to changes in the physical security and pocketbook economy of members revealed how challenging the operating environment has become for this community. Grant and donation allocations have shrunk in aggregate since Covid. A strong case was laid out for finding — and funding — an effective virtual platform (or online hub or application) for cross-disciplinary collaboration.

Images: (top right) map of JAS/JS in attendance; (bottom left) NAJAS banners in the Black Box Theatre

JapanHands.org is a promising start for which funding is needed this calendar year for the NAJAS/AFIHJ team to match the substantial initial grant from the United States Japan Foundation (USJF). **Announcements by Amb. Yamada** to extend the **Japan Currents** series of talks and by leaders within the Kentucky General Assembly to model a **Japan Caucus** were encouraging, as was an initiative from Premier Sponsor **Japanet America** to bring more Americans to the Japan beyond Tokyo, Kyoto, and Osaka, and bolster societies en route.

2. Conveners-in-Chief: NAJAS is the umbrella organization for over 40 independent non-profits across the United States (and a bit of Ontario), dedicated to promoting US-Japan ties and understanding. There is no other bilateral relationship in the world with an infrastructure and community like this. 80 years ago to the month, the United States and Japan were enemies; today, we are mutually indispensable partners in a host of endeavors from peace maintenance to space exploration.



NAJAS picks a different location annually to gather its non-profit and non-partisan members to share best practices, study relationship developments, and explore partnerships. This year's gathering – playfully, a “Japan-related Org (JRO) Palooza” – was the most intensive, broadest and impactful yet. It included workshops, panels, a board meeting, a separate JRO professional development summit (produced by CULCON/US just prior to the conference), a mini-trade show and film festival, panels, industry tours, group dinners, sake tasting ... all capped by the JAS Kentucky's Gala for over 300 guests – an annual staple that was postponed by April's historic rainfall and flooding.

Adding a creative vibe was staging all at the **Pam Miller Downtown Arts Center**, a municipal performance and community hub for social and arts life in charming, 250-year-old Lexington.

Images: (middle left) facade of the Pam Miller Downtown Arts Center; (bottom right) KY Rep. Grossl, Amb. Yamada, Cong. Barr, ConGen (Nashville) Watanabe, and KY Sen. Nunn



Klieg lights hit tariffs, legislator ties, sister cities, travel, baseball, sake and film, among other topics. The conference featured the participation of both the Japanese Ambassador and Consul General resident in Nashville, as well as city, state and federal elected officials, headlined by **Cong. Andy Barr**, whose district includes Lexington, and responsibilities include the U.S.-Japan Caucus and Japan Congressional Study Group.



Japanese **Ambassador to the United States Shigeo Yamada**, returning for a second year to this Conference, began his Gala remarks by announcing that the Embassy would be nearly doubling its support for public affairs programs under the prestigious *Japan Currents* lecture series in the current fiscal year, with a focus on high-tech business talks.

3. By-the-numbers: Participation steadily grew from in-house gathering of association colleagues – under **100** on the first day – to some **150** on the second, as partners and experts joined in to lead management workshops – before swelling to **300 attendees for the closing**, which was combined with the annual gala, to which JASK generously treated conference goers.

Various highwater marks:

- A record 35 of 41 societies attended, including new members joining for the first time from Phoenix, AZ, Madison, WI and Newport, RI
- Many participated with multiple staff and board members, showing rising engagement
- A record 10 of 11 NAJAS Executive Committee members joined, as did three NAJAS past presidents/chairs
- 4 NAJAS Network Corporate Donors (**Japanet America, Aflac, The Asia Group** and **MUFG**), participated, in addition to JASK's company sponsors
- 15 firms funded NAJAS' part of the conference, including 12 "Solutions Providers"
- 16 Japan-related groups attended a NAJAS conference for the first time

Images: (middle left) poster at the Arts Center, named for a previous Mayor of Lexington

- 4 elected officials spoke, 3 music acts performed, 2 filmmakers screened works (with public ticket sales), a “stamp rally competition” awarded air tickets to Japan and a hotel stay, and a public television feature was filmed on site – (although no pear tree was found for our partridge).
- Wait-for-it! A combined team of under a dozen staff and volunteers from NAJAS and JASK executed all activities, with a small cash surplus, in under 12 weeks!



4. Why not Grassroots of Bluegrass? Apart from being a picturesque and central location, Kentucky boasts a surprising wealth of ties to Japan, of which thoroughbred horse culture, bourbon distilling and, recently, sake brewing, great sushi and karaoke, a Japanese garden, scholastic and exchange offerings, and multiple sister cities links are representative. For Kentucky, like the nation, direct investments are foundational, with automotive, electrical,

machine tool, and agro-industry anchoring about 200 Japanese-capital firms in the Commonwealth. NAJAS enthusiastically accepted JASK President (and Honorary Consul of Japan in Kentucky) David Carpenter’s offer to host in Lexington, following 2024’s successful conference in Portland, OR.

Images: (left) Walker, Chanlett-Avery, Yamada, Cutler at Theise-Warren Home; (right) AWylegala, YWylegala, and Simons-Lane





Fittingly, the conference's opening activity was a plant tour of Toyota's nearby Georgetown operation, the firm's largest assembly facility in the world. The tour was oversubscribed. NAJAS thanks our top Network Donor, **Toyota Motors North America** and the local subsidiary, **Toyota Motor Manufacturing Kentucky**, for their generous support of the NAJAS national network program and the Kentucky conference, respectively.

Another JASK-Japan synergy, tour groups such as *Japan Discovery Travel*, a hit program developed by President Carpenter, segued neatly into the inclusion of **Japanet America** as the conference's **Premier Sponsor**. Japanet America is a group company of Japanet, a Japanese mail-order company founded in 1986, focusing on US sales of cruise package tours around Japan. In under three years of operation, the company exceeded 100,000 passengers and won the *Cruise of the Year 2023 Grand Prix* in Japan.

A four-person delegation from Japanet gave two talks, attended a sponsor appreciation reception in Georgetown attended by Kentucky Lt. Gov. Jacqueline Coleman and Amb. Yamada, and networked from an exhibition table, with the leadership of the San Jose-based General Manager of Japanet America, Ms. Chiaki Naka, and the President of Japanet Cruise, Mr. Tomonobu Ibaraki, who joined from Nagasaki. Japanet announced on site an exclusive 5% full-season discount on tours purchased by any individual member of NAJAS-affiliated society. Additional initiatives will come, to enrich cultural discovery through seaborne travel, as NAJAS facilitates introductions to individual societies and CIE/CIE-US.



5. ***“Japan-America Is Working”*** was the conference tagline taken from a NAJAS *LinkedIn* campaign to highlight the scope and positive societal impact of the enormous, world-leading annual flow and stock of direct investment from Japan across America (see compilation below).

Images: (top left) Japanet reps booking berths; (bottom left) Mazak is one of almost 200 Japanese firms in Kentucky

Trade, investment and technology relationships sustain and animate most of NAJAS' 41 members, while business related activities trail only cultural and educational ones in frequency for the societies' programming.

#JAIW also responds to the policy agenda turn and NAJAS funding partner focus over this half-year of the Trump Administration, when tariffs and manufacturing policy reshaped Japan-America ties and many international relationships. NAJAS and its members, fully non-partisan, are uniquely positioned to share the ground truth that Japan represents the #1 source of foreign investment in the United States in 40 of 50 states in the union – and is #2 or #3 in the other 10, with a pace that has been accelerating, without broad tariff action, as well as how beneficial a presence Japanese investors have become.

Again, aside from the scale of the investment, the spillover for the communities near all this direct investment for up to 50 years has been undeniably positive in aggregate. Japanese are corporate citizens!

Following the Toyota tour, commercial themes returned to the fore on the third, outward-facing day of the conference when leads from **Keidanren USA**, the **U.S.-Japan Business Council**, and **Aflac/Japanese Commerce Association of Washington** joined conference co-funder and enabling partner, the **Japan Foundation New York**, led by its Director General, on a kick-off panel. The private sector representatives contrasted their roles in economic policy and promotion spheres, and how they interact with non-profits, including in funds-granting. Notable in that it was not much remarked upon: all three powerful business organizations were represented by women born in Japan. Unremarkable!

Following this panel was a look at the U.S.-Japan tariff announcement of July 22nd (since publicly documented), its implications for the bilateral economic relationship and, potentially, for wider global economic and geostrategic alignments.

Incoming **NAJAS Chairwoman Emma Chanlett-Avery** deftly steered the analysis by her boss, **Sr. Vice President at the Asia Society Wendy Cutler**, and her predecessor at NAJAS, **Amb. Kurt Tong, Managing Partner at NAJAS-funder, The Asia Group, Inc.**



Images: (bottom right) Tong, Cutler, and Chanlett-Avery on a panel

6. Beyond NAJAS & Beyond Commerce: Outward-facing Conference Day topics:

- Japan's Tourism Boom and Meaning for Cultural Connection (**Japanet, Imperial Hotel, CIE-US**)
- How NAJAS & American Friends of International House of Japan (AFIHJ) are fundraising for a community data hub—and how to help
- How the US-Japan Ecosystem is addressing shifting context and external pressures
- Announcement by **Rep. Vanessa Grossi** (returned JET) and **Sen. Matt Nunn** (Toyota Tsusho executive) of the formation with Consulate General of Japan in Nashville of a Kentucky Japan Caucus, one of the first such in the United States.
- The Power of Public & Citizen Diplomacy with NAJAS Sec. Margot Carrington (pictured)
- Baseball as National Pastime / Education & Exchange Driver with JASWDC Pres. Ryan Shaffer
- Remarks by U.S. Department of State, Office of Japanese Affairs Acting Director Margaret Hsiang.



7. NAJAS Internal Work – Society Management & Program Workshops, Board Meeting



Equally important as learning from outside experts is the sharing of lessons in the challenging art of society management (paid and volunteer), and good program design from society peers. This year, 10 separate sessions along three simultaneous tracks were curated by NFP consultant **Beth Porter**, based upon member input.

Kicking off the work was a self-sponsored two-hour session from specialist in leadership development and personal pacing, **Nozomi Michiki Morgan**, who also served outstandingly as emcee for the external day. Sessions were recorded and will be posted along with reference materials to member-access pages of NAJAS' website—how we build capacity year-long.



*E.D.'s Mike Turner (New Orleans), Lindsay Nakashima (Austin), & Claudine Locascio (Denver), caught up with DG Hiroyuki Kojima (of JFNY ... and proud grad of Urawa Koto Gakko – **Go Tsuru's!**)*



Rounding out in-house training were presentations and office hours with the tremendously supportive leadership of Japan Foundation (JFNY and JFLA), both of whom funded and informed the member support work within the conference. Deep thanks to **Director General Hiroyuki Kojima (NY)** and **Director Yasuko Uchida (LA)**.

WORKSHOP TOPICS

- Budgeting in uncertain times (and it's always an uncertain times)
- The successful ED-Board Chair relationship
- Human Resources Basics for Nonprofit Leaders
- Sake Programming
- Introducing Japanet
- Nonprofit CRM systems
- Delivering the Mission: Defining Your Programming
- Youth Programming
- Tackling global and regional issues through a US-Japan lens



The NAJAS Annual Conference has incorporated the association's single board meeting. Growth from 13 members at the 1979 founding to 41 today brought complexity to governance. Accordingly, a committee of society leaders worked with the president over 2025 to streamline the bylaws, resulting in a unitary board which was voted in following adoption of the revised bylaws.

Images: (top left) JFNY and JFLA presentation; (bottom left) Wylegala and Tong

The first order of business for the new board was offering a reluctant farewell – paired with enthusiastic thanks and token gifts – to **outgoing Board Chair Kurt Tong**. Ambassador Tong served five years as Vice Chair and Chair, during which he spearheaded strategic repositioning and subsequent growth. Kurt remains on the Advisory Council.

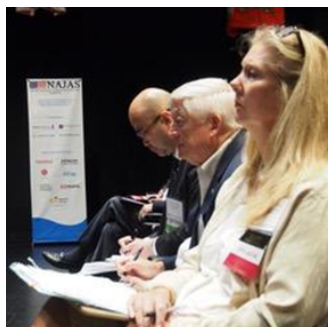


Not to miss a beat, Vice Chair since 2021 **Emma Chanlett-Avery** was unanimously elected to serve as Chairwoman and began her term by reinforcing thanks to her predecessor and welcoming a new 13-member board (increased by one over 2024's Executive Committee).

Rounding out the officer ranks will be retired accomplished international banker Richard Raiford as Vice Chair, and retired U.S. Senior Foreign Service Officer Margot Carrington as Secretary, while retired and tireless CPA Celso Mataac returns as Treasurer. At-large society heads, Anne Golden (JAS Greater Cincinnati), David Carpenter (JAS/Kentucky), Joshua Walker (Japan Society), and Reyna Kaneko (JAS Hawaii) all return for another year. Bahia Simons-Lane (International Student Conferences) and William Farrell (former NAJAS Chair) return as the fifth and sixth Independent Board Directors, respectively. Finally, as part of a modest board expansion, NAJAS Regular Members unanimously voted onto the board are Executive Director of JASCO, Noriko Mills, and President of JSNC, Steve Pollock.



Images: (top left) Chanlett-Avery; (middle right) Raiford and Cutler; (bottom right) CIE-US' Kelly and other attentive colleagues taking in a panel; (bottom far right) Shapiro and Mataac





8. In *Sake*—and other

Refreshment--Veritas: books, film, sake, bourbon, food, music, sightseeing, mixing-and-mingling ...rounded out a teeming half-week of teaming, bonding ... and relaxing into late-summer.

With travel and history of common NAJAS passion, it was a natural for NAJAS to invite long-time friend (from ACCJ days and earlier), two-time author **Dr. Samuel Kidder**, Trustee of the American Friends of International

House of Japan and member of JAS Pennsylvania. Sam last year published, ***Our First Glimpse of Japan***, about four prominent American visitors to Meiji Japan, and promptly brought a discussion of one chapter of the work to the National Parks Service site that commemorates one of the travelers, Ulysses S. Grant, under a NAJAS/Embassy of Japan program hosted by JAS St. Louis. *Glimpses* was a sought-out read (and the only fully sanctioned gift of the conference!) that will enrich cultural, historical and commercial “dives” into Japan-bound travel and, perhaps, its obverse -- as Japanese study up on the fascinating American protagonists.



Sports diplomacy and, particularly the bond between Americans and Japanese that the game of baseball has engendered -- from Horace Wilson to Shohei Ohtani -- became a must-incorporate theme for 2025, which groups including the **MLB Players Trust** and the Japan Retired Foreign Player Association equipped us to tackle.

Images: (top left) *Bentenya dazzles*; (bottom left) *Janes and Marriott*

In **Yuriko Gamo Romer**, noted documentary filmmaker, baseball led us to film and the screening/discussion of the short ***Baseball Behind Barbed Wire***, which examines the role of baseball in sustaining cultural and national identity in the face of wartime internment, and an out-take from the forthcoming ***Diamond Diplomacy***, a study of a broader historical swath of baseball ties we are excited to see premiered any week now.



From baseball documentary our collective passion for film led us to **Marc Marriott**, the California-based first-time independent feature director of ***Tokyo Cowboy***, which Dr. Walker showed us is a must-see film, heartwarming and hilarious, and which has won festival awards and a 96% audience approval rating.

Running exclusive director Q&As for two wonderful productions in an intimate theater was memorable in a packed agenda, and we only wished we could have shared more time with these rare talents as filmmakers, who gave wonderful Q+A sessions post-screening, with the Lexington public. A Network film series building off brilliance from New York, Phoenix, Austin and other JAS cine hotspots is a must-do item for the coming year. Meanwhile, be sure to stream Cowboy and catch Diamond at a festival, soon.

Deep thanks **Ryan Shaffer**, and **Dr. David Janes** for their stellar moderation of sessions on baseball and film ... and to **Margot Carrington**, for her practiced insights in leading our Public Diplomacy/SCI panel.

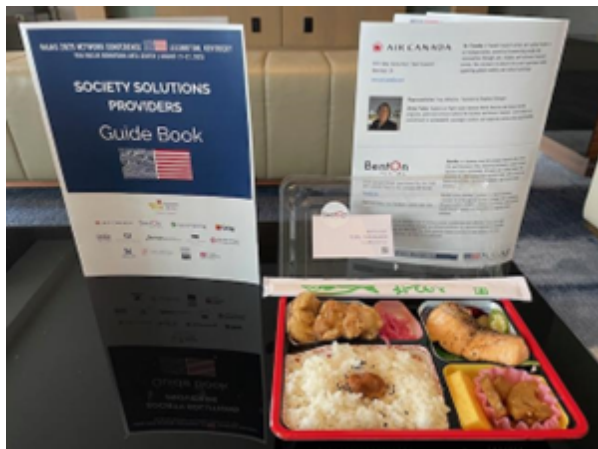
In 2024, the network-to-network connections NAJAS targeted were with NAJAS' counterpart from Tokyo, (NAAJS under Amb. Fujisaki), as well as the North American Japanese Garden Association (NAJGA).



This year, NAJAS approached the **Sake Brewers Association of North America (SBANA)** to “pair” brewers and close-by societies. A collaborative promotion was developed, with sommeliers, wholesalers and brewers, four of whom attended in person to fill those teeny tiny ochoko and educate

palates, while another five generously shipped in a variety of sakes, “kara-kuchi” to fruit-infused. Key to the promotion was Lexington’s own **The Void Sake Co.**, whose co-founder, Justin LeVaughn, generously took on logistics with visionary SBANA President Weston Konishi masterminding it all.

To further network-level collaboration SBANA is developing a virtual “Sake Passport,” that NAJAS members will use to earn discounts or prizes as they deepen their knowledge of America’s brewers and promote this UNESCO-recognized treasure. Special thanks to **JETRO** who helped fund an industry event that was held at The Void on the second night, and for sharing with the conference **JETRO NY President Miura**, and JETRO San Francisco’s **Genta Ando**, back for a second year.



Accompanying the sake were Japanese obento and other dishes from NYC and Ohio-based BentOn, which NAJAS was delighted to introduce to more of the NAJAS community, having met the Delicacies-on-Wheels caterers through former Consul General (Detroit) Shindo.

In addition to the sake vendors, NAJAS expanded the tabletop trade show launched in Portland in 2024 with three participants as the **Society Solutions Provider (SSP)** program. This year pioneer Temple University Japan returned, followed by NAJAS’ recruitment of another dozen. These vendors bring diverse products or services tailored to our societies’ needs and interests – bento to software – yielding a natural marketplace. It was a matter of signing up the best suppliers, who provided cash or in-kind donations, as well as their profiles that NAJAS made available in a booklet at the conference and will run on a website until the “SSP Fair” at the next conference.



Images: (middle left) obento for lunch; (bottom right) the Ambassador visiting Society Solutions Providers

(Book a 2026 table via sanchezalvarez@us-japan.org). And now that you've heard about the "other" Japan House (LA) from President Yuko Kaifu, book an exhibit ticket or bespoke concert performance soon.



Taking a cue from Japanese “school trip” practice, NAJAS introduced a “stamp rally” competition that had attendees on their toes, looking to qualify for daily drawings of prizes from those very exhibitors – such as marvelous bottles of whiskey from Gray and NMWorldwide, a two-night stay at Nagasaki Stadium City Hotel from Japanet, and a roundtrip flight to Japan on **AirCanada** – by meeting with and then collecting ink-stamps from our vendor-SSPs.



Images: (top left) Temple University tabling; (middle left) Sam Kidder's book and other materials



The Incomparable 2025 Society Solutions Providers: Collect 'em All:

AirCanada, BentOn, Bloomerang, Gray Construction, Ikigai Connections & JCO, Imperial Hotel, Japan Automobile Manufacturers Association, Japan House Los Angeles, Japanet Cruise, Michiki Morgan Worldwide, NeonOne, SBANA, Samuel Kidder, and Temple University Japan.

To review the offerings for the year to come, please visit www.us-japan.org

To enliven more types of spirits, NAJAS ran with a tip from JAS St. Louis and contacted NYC-based agent Hiroshi Kono of one-of-a-kind chindonya band, **Bentenya**. Three of the band traveled from Nagoya to Lexington (via JAS Indiana's blockbuster gala, an overnight drive away), to surprise and delight conference goers with their eclectic mix of Showa nostalgia, anime tunes and Kentucky folk, played on trumpet, sax and percussion, under neon wigs and dazzling yukata, as they wended around the theater, into the elevator and around the Center!



Bentenya is drawn to the allure of Route 66, which celebrates its centennial next year, so they will be back. Book the band early as they are in demand, as their spin-offs from Lexington to Tennessee and Missouri demonstrated. At the Gala, following remarks from Sec. **Jim Gray** and **Amb. Yamada**, JASK elevated entertainment further with Grammy Award-winning koto virtuoso **Masayo Ishigure** and **Wadaiko Gouken**, a top taiko troupe from Cincinnati, at the Gala.

Finally, spirited, if less professional, musicianship was on display at the conference's Karaoke night, hosted at nearby favorite **School Sushi**.



Much of the energy of any professional conference revolves around informal catchups and serendipitous introductions during the breaks, bites or bus rides. Attendees took maximal advantage of two receptions, small group dinner outings, and every short pause in the agenda. The true deliverables of the conference, thus, lie beyond this summary in new ideas being hatched, now, amongst attendees.

Finally, “it took a village,” to build this conference. The village of Greater Lexington provided hospitality, warmth and great convenience. We were a stone’s throw from Mary Todd Lincoln’s house, not far from on-ramps to the Bourbon Trail, nor the Kentucky Horse Park, which featured the oddly named but really cool “Uma no Kokoro” exhibit. Further afield, Louisville and the Slugger Museum beckoned fans. No dull destination, Kentucky.

Image: (top left) break with a beat; (middle left) selfie friends



The second “village” was the production team. From the NAJAS side all praise is due Rookie of NAJAS’ 2025, **Bianca Sanchez-Alvarez**, who stepped improbably into the conference coordinator’s role with under 10 weeks to plan and, without even venue contract in hand, made all gel. Equally essential to conference promotion and production was **Misha Clive**, who elevated their craft from the 2024

Portland outing. We’d have not had the chance to welcome Margaret Hsiang nor Tomonobu Ibaraki without Kurt Tong. Emma, Margot, Rich, David, Joshua, Beth and Nozomi—you know who you are!

Also, focused on support to our Premier Sponsor and design needs was Oita-ken JET-in-Waiting **Mya Darden**. Leading the sake and SSP programs, respectively, were our outstanding KoreaWEST intern duo **Yejun Bang** and **Yuseon Choi**. AFIHJ summer intern, **Natalie Janssen**, joined from Miami of Ohio and kept us on schedule and in humor.



Images: (top left) Ambassador welcomed Coordinator and new hire, Bianca Sanchez-Alvarez; (middle left) Bang and Choi; (bottom left) NAJAS staff; (bottom right) Carpenter and Representative Gross



Among the fabulous host society, Chair Rene DeBerdt and President David Carpenter opened doors we were not even aware of, from Capitol Hill, the Governor's Mansion and City Hall, onto the producers of julep cups ... and the incomparable Shelley Theise, who inexplicably found all the hard work good fun and the time to bake a village-worth of

cookies. We are indebted to new JASK hire **Abby Edwards**, who supported in many ways and stole the public TV interview with her eloquence.

Image: [Abby Edwards interview on KET](#)

Till Summer 2026!

