

# Kasagi: Gates Of Hope

In 2013, two nearly identical beams of a sacred Shinto gate landed on the Oregon coast after having been tragically washed away in the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011. After traveling 5,000 miles across the Pacific, incredibly, these two crossbeams, know as kasagi landed within 120 miles of each other less than one month apart. Virtually unidentifiable, they could have been abandoned, forgotten, and lost forever. Instead, the quest to return the two battered pieces of wood has brought people together from across the globe as a message of support for the people of Japan. What unfolds is the story of what connects us as humans: life, loss, perseverance, and hope.

*On March 22, 2013 an unknown artifact appeared on the shores of Oceanside, Oregon*



 Judson Randall

It was still dark when Judson Randall first saw the long, bowed piece of painted wood lying quietly on the beach. Since the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, Randall was accustomed to seeing debris that had washed ashore near his home in Oceanside, Oregon. He walked toward it through the cold March morning air, unclear what this particular object was. From a distance it looked like a boat but as he got closer he realized that this was something much more significant.

Two years earlier, on March 11, 2011, a 9.0 earthquake struck Japan triggering a massive tsunami that washed away coastal communities in Northeastern Japan and sent roughly five million tons of debris out to sea. Entire villages were wiped out. Communities were torn apart. Loved ones were separated from each other and from that which they held most dear. In the wake of the disaster, it seemed unclear whether life would ever return to the way it had once been. In that moment, the world paused, humbled by the loss sustained, aching for people they didn't know.

But time dims the pain of even the most vivid moments, and what stopped the world in 2011 started to feel like a distant memory a mere two years later. Not for everyone of course. In 2013, Japanese communities were still looking for the missing pieces of their former lives. Meanwhile, across the ocean, those missing pieces were resurfacing. More often than not, it was debris torn apart beyond recognition. But sometimes it was identifiable. A volleyball here. A boat there. Connections to lives lost and lives still being lived.

The large piece of wood Randall saw lying on the shore appeared to be just such a connection. Painted red and 14' long, it looked like *something*. Immediately Randall called the Oregon State Parks & Recreation Department to report the finding. As the sun rose, Randall took photos to share with Park rangers in hopes that someone could identify this unusual discovery.



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The unknown *kasagi* in its original location in 2009

The rangers didn't know what the mysterious object was but they knew someone who might. Portland television reporter Kyle Iboshi had been reporting extensively on Japanese debris recovered from the 2011 tsunami so they quickly texted the photos to him. Coincidentally, Iboshi was filming a story at the Portland Japanese Garden that day and upon receiving the text, he showed it to the Garden's Curator, Sadafumi "Sada" Uchiyama. Uchiyama, a Japanese native and third-generation Japanese gardener knew immediately that this was no ordinary "debris" but a sacred artifact from a Shinto shrine—a *kasagi* from a *torii* gate.

## A COMPELLING RELIC

A *torii* is a traditional gate used to mark the entrance to a hallowed space. It symbolically marks the transition from the secular to the sacred in the world of Shinto, the indigenous religion of Japan. In a country with tens of thousands of Shinto shrines, torii are found throughout the land, from the roads leading to a shrine, to the entrance of the shrine itself. Shinto practice began among clans in small farming and fishing villages. With the island nation's long coastline, Shinto shrines with their torii are often built along the shores of Japan to pray for the safety of the fisherman. While there are a number of styles, all torii follow a similar structural pattern of having two posts connected above by a long and sturdy crossbeam known as a *kasagi*. It is this integral piece of a torii that had been washed away by the tsunami, traveling over 5,000 miles across the Pacific Ocean over the course of two years and washing up on the Oregon coast. Later, in an interview Randall recalled "I found it very moving to look at it close up. This thing had real meaning to the people of Japan. It was quite moving to realize this had traveled across the ocean...and here it is: a compelling relic of [the earthquake]."

Once the item was identified as a *kasagi*, the Office of the Consulate-General of Japan in Portland was contacted. The Consul General's office worked—and continues to work—with Japan's Foreign Ministry and the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to list such objects on a Lost Belongings website. The site's function is to match up items that are found on the U.S. Coast with their rightful owners in Japan. This particular *kasagi* that Randall had found was uniquely designed in the distinctive Myojin style (明神型), but it still lacked any identifying marks or inscriptions. The unknown *kasagi* stayed on the NOAA list for months but no claims were made by anyone in Japan.

## ANOTHER?

Incredibly, one month later on April 9, 2013 a second kasagi was spotted on a deserted beach in Florence, Oregon by Wali and Jabrila Via as they took their daily walk. As a gobo farmer who had visited Japan, Mr. Via knew immediately what he was looking at and called the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department. While he and Mrs. Via waited for the Parks department to arrive, they called Mrs. Via's sister to consult her on what might be done. Coincidentally, Mrs. Via's sister arranged visitor tours in Japan and was familiar with the practice of showing respect at a shrine gate. She instructed them to bow twice, clap twice and bow once more, which the Vias did right there on the beach. Once the Park rangers arrived, they noted that unlike the first kasagi, this one had a Japanese inscription on it that rangers hoped would help solve the mystery of where this—and perhaps the first kasagi—had come.

The Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs listed the second kasagi on their Lost Belongings website but once again, no claims were made. Four months went by and the Portland Japanese community was puzzled. Surely such an important object was missed by its own community back home. However, with no identification on the first kasagi and technically no proof that the 2011 tsunami was in fact what carried these two artifacts away, the Foreign Ministry concluded that it would be impossible to find the rightful owners; they could no longer allocate any resources to the effort of reuniting these kasagi with their place of origin.

From the moment Uchiyama received the first picture, he knew these pieces were too special to leave unidentified and forgotten. The Portland Japanese Garden executive team met with Japanese community organizations (e.g., Japan-American Society of Oregon) to discuss options for the kasagi. What would be done with these significant but anonymous artifacts?

Stephen Bloom, CEO of the Portland Japanese Garden, immediately understood that if there was any hope of returning these pieces, the Garden was the only organization that could make it happen. He brought the proposal to the Board of Trustees who agreed; it was decided that the Portland Japanese Garden was the best candidate to take temporary custody and more importantly take on the responsibility of finding their rightful Japanese homes. Bloom enlisted the help of Board of Trustee member Dorie Vollum who volunteered to house both kasagi at her home. The large pieces were carefully relocated to the Vollums' garage while the long search began.



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*A second kasagi, nearly identical to the first, washed ashore in Florence, Oregon one month later*



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*Employees from the Portland Japanese Garden move both kasagi to the Vollums' residence for safekeeping*

- 1  Sadafumi Uchiyama
- 2  Oregon Parks and Recreation Department
- 3  Sadafumi Uchiyama

*Kasagi II in the Vollum garage  
with salt water, rice & wrapped  
seaweed*



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## TWIN NEEDLES IN A HAYSTACK

Although the first kasagi (**Kasagi I**) had no identifying marks, the other (**Kasagi II**) still had the middle post on its crossbeam with two pieces of information:

1. The name of Toshimi Takahashi, the man who originally dedicated the kasagi to its shrine. This only narrowed the search slightly since in Japan, the name Takahashi is like “Smith” or “Jones” in the U.S.
2. The person who dedicated the kasagi—Mr. Takahashi—was born in the Year of the Snake which means he would be 108, 96, 84, 72, or 60. He could have been younger though not likely because of the clue Uchiyama added next.

Uchiyama pointed out that torii were often donated by a local guild and dedicated by the head of that guild. So “Toshimi Takahashi” would most likely be an older gentleman who had been of some import in his community. But what type of guild it was that dedicated this kasagi was unknown and could be anything from fishing to cotton. With nothing else to go on, Uchiyama and Bloom put their heads together and turned to the people they knew to systematically comb the country for clues.

Over the next year, information was scarce. Everyone wanted to help, but no one knew anything specific about one missing kasagi, let alone two. Finally, Uchiyama and Bloom decided a trip to Japan was necessary. Meanwhile, Dorie Vollum had become quite devoted to the kasagi she had been hosting. Having learned that many torii are located near the sea, she started sprinkling salt water on the two kasagi accompanied by rice and seaweed to keep them connected to their coastal home.

## ALL HANDS ON DECK

Finally it was decided that Uchiyama and Vollum would go back to Japan where they would visit areas hit hardest by the tsunami. Their job? Spread the word about the found kasagi in hopes of connecting with anyone who might provide a clue. Their trip would focus on the three prefectures in the Tohoku region that were hardest hit (“prefecture” is the loose equivalent of a U.S. state): Miyagi, Iwate, Fukushima.

As the trip got closer, the team was no closer to knowing the kasagi’s origin than they were one year earlier. But things started looking promising when Bloom met with the Portland Japanese Garden’s International Advisory Board (IAB) in Tokyo and recounted the conundrum of the anonymous kasagi. Upon hearing the story, Mr. Masatoshi Ito, President and CEO of Ajinomoto Foods and member of the IAB, was so moved to help, that he offered the assistance of his own employees. He mobilized his staff with the directive to “find old shrines that have washed away.” In a country with over 10,000 shrines, this was no small task. In fact, there is a centralized administration agency for shrines throughout the country, the prefectural branches of which are called *jinja-cho*. Mr. Ito’s staff put aside their daily work for a few weeks to call the *jinja-cho* in the three targeted prefectures and get details of all the washed away shrines. Though the staff came up with over 100 names, they had no luck identifying the origin for these particular kasagi. To the Garden team, it felt like the Japan trip could either be another heartbreaking dead end or just the break they needed.

In May of 2014, Vollum and Uchiyama went to Japan and traveled town by town in the three prefectures spreading the word about the found kasagi. They showed pictures to their respective contacts throughout the Tohoku region. They shared the story with taxi drivers, hotel proprietors and in restaurants. One night at dinner, the two were even asked to stand up and tell the entire restaurant the story of the two kasagi that landed in America. Their hunt throughout the Tohoku region attracted the attention of NHK, a national Japanese television news agency, who did a story about the two U.S. travelers in search of reconnecting two sacred kasagi with their rightful owners. In the broadcast, it gave Uchiyama’s email as a contact address for anyone who could provide more information.

Mr. Hitoshi Sakai who worked for the Iwaki City Historical Society in Fukushima Prefecture saw the NHK broadcast and emailed Uchiyama writing, “I think I can help.”



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Identification marks on the middle post of Kasagi II

- 1  Lisa Christy
- 2  Sadafumi Uchiyama

(Source: Google maps)



Although Miyagi, Iwate, and Fukushima Prefectures were hardest hit by the 2011 tsunami, coastal villages up and down the east coast were significantly affected



Photo from c. 2009: In the distance, two torii stand outside the humble, satellite Itsukushima shrine

## CONNECTING THE DOTS

Working through email, Uchiyama and Mr. Sakai compared notes on their findings from the three prefectures. And as they did, they started connecting the dots. Fishing village; a remote shrine; Takahashi...a light bulb went on: look farther north to Aomori prefecture. Once they started looking at Aomori Prefecture, they were quickly able to narrow the search to the remote fishing village of Okuki, just outside of Hachinohe.

Mr. Sakai enlisted the help of Mr. Jun Furusato at the Hachinohe City Museum to find out if there were torii gates lost during the tsunami. There were. In fact, he verified through photos that there was not one, but two torii that had once stood in front of the village's shrine—erected as a tribute to the main Itsukushima Shrine in Hatsukaichi—that were washed away in the tsunami.

Mr. Furusato then located an 85-year-old man named Toshimi Takahashi still living in Hachinohe. It was confirmed that this man was indeed the head of the local fishing guild that dedicated the torii to the shrine in 1988. After searching for over a year, these discoveries were an incredible step forward.

Working through Mr. Furusato, the team at Portland Japanese Garden reached out to tell Mr. Takahashi that the kasagi he donated, **Kasagi II**, had been found. As it turned out, Mr. Takahashi had actually witnessed the waves washing the torii gates away. Upon learning that the kasagi had been recovered, he was emotional but not surprised when told of these kasagi remarkable journey saying, “We have a precedent.” He recounted that in 1898 a devastating tsunami hit Tohoku and washed a statue from their shrine. Ninety years later, the statue washed back up on the shores of Japan and was later returned to the shrine where it now stands. He tells the group that this shrine has the capacity to bring back its elements.

From there things moved quickly. Working with Mr. Sakai, Uchiyama ascertained that if **Kasagi I** is indeed part of the second torii gate of the Itsukushima Shrine, it would have been given by the late Mr. Kinjiro Takahashi, the head of a fishing guild in Okuki Kiriyanai, inland 30 miles from Hachinohe.

- 1  Sadafumi Uchiyama
- 2  To-o Nippo, November 19, 2014
- 3  Dorie Vollum

"Torii from Hachinohe washed onto a U.S. Coast"



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Working with the son of Kinjiro Takahashi—Mr. Masanori Takahashi, who still lives in Hachinohe—the team at the Portland Japanese Garden began a rigorous analysis to determine whether the unidentified **Kasagi I** was from Hachinohe. Uchiyama took measurements of **Kasagi I** and used old photos of the shrine shot prior to the tsunami along with Computer-Aided Design and Drafting (CADD) software to determine whether or not it was a physical match. As the Garden team consulted with experts and studied the evidence—from matching measurements to ocean currents to the curved Myojin style unique to the Aomori region—it became more and more likely that **Kasagi I** was indeed the missing gate.



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Mr. Masanori Takahashi ultimately made the call. He told the Garden team he felt confident that this was the other missing kasagi. He continued, saying that, “Even if it isn’t the kasagi of my father, I would be happy to adopt it on behalf of Hachinohe,” in honor of his father.

Joyful and relieved to have the hardest part over, the Garden team turned their attention to getting the kasagi back home. In November of 2014, Uchiyama and Vollum returned to Japan, this time heading straight to Hachinohe to visit personally with both Toshimi and Masanori Takahashi for the first time. Uchiyama and Vollum, along with both Takahashis and Mr. Furusato, begin to lay the groundwork to return both kasagi. Decisions needed to be made. A new torii gate had already been erected in their stead. So should the returned kasagi be kept in their water-worn state and displayed as a testament to the difficult journey? Or should they be rebuilt back into torii gates? Ultimately, the people of Hachinohe chose to look forward. The gates would be rebuilt and rededicated. They would stand in their original place as a symbol of perseverance, recovery, and hope.

Far left front: Toshimi Takahashi  
Far right front: Sadafumi Uchiyama



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## NO ONE SAID NO

Funding, shipping, organizing. Though much work had already been done, the needs to return the two kasagi to Japan were still great. Fortunately, the story—and the hearts it touched—were greater. Generosity and support continued in all forms.

In the spring of 2015, Bloom, Vollum and Uchiyama returned, joined by International Advisory Board member Geoffrey Hoefler, to finalize details for returning and repairing the kasagi. Living in New York City, Hoefler had only recently become involved with the Portland Japanese Garden. But when he heard the kasagi story, he not only enlisted financial support for the kasagi return from his foundation, the Omomuki Foundation, but he booked travel to Hachinohe with the Garden team to witness firsthand how best he could help. When the Americans arrived in Hachinohe, they were met by the Aomori Prefectural Vice Governor and the Mayor of Hachinohe, as well as the crew from NHK and dozens of other reporters from around Japan. Thanks to the unwavering support and coverage from NHK, news of this story had traveled across the country inspiring gratitude and interest in all who heard it.

The news stretched beyond the borders of Japan. As Garden leaders reached out to partners to secure transportation for the two kasagi—each measuring 16 feet long and weighing roughly 300 pounds—generosity continued to come forth. At last it was determined that on August 15 the kasagi would begin their long journey home. With support from Pacific Lumber & Shipping LLC, Yamato Global Logistics Japan Co, Ltd, Yamato Transport, U.S.A., Inc., and Uyeno Transtech Ltd., the kasagi would be crated in Oregon, driven to Seattle, Washington and then shipped to Yokohama port in southern Japan. Once there, the two would be driven the final 450 miles back to Okuki where they would be restored, rebuilt into torii gates, and re-installed in their original locations at the entrance to the humble Itsukushima Shrine. Mr. Suetako Takekomo, the local carpenter who would be rebuilding the torii was the same man who had originally crafted the gates 40 years earlier.



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*Garden leaders meet with the people of Hachinohe to work out how to return the two kasagi*



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U.S. Ambassador to Japan, Caroline Kennedy, at a ceremony to welcome the two kasagi back to Japan: “The Pacific ocean is not something that divides us but is something that connects us.”

## CONNECTING CULTURES

For two years both kasagi had quietly rested in the Vollums’ garage, waiting for all the pieces of their puzzle to be put together. With their origin determined and the logistics worked out, the Portland Japanese Garden arranged a final farewell. Both kasagi were lightly cleaned and displayed in the Garden from July 21–August 9 for visitors to celebrate and honor. While there, Garden volunteers helped collect messages of support written by visitors for the kasagi and the people of Hachinohe. The messages, written on origami paper, were folded into cranes by local schoolchildren and later returned with the kasagi.

On August 15 Uchiyama and the gardeners did a final, gentle wash of the kasagi before sending them to be packed and crated for the long journey home. One month later, the kasagi arrived in Yokohama where they were honored with a receiving ceremony and reception led by priests from the Tsurugaoka Hachimangu Shrine of Kamakura. The event was attended by the Garden leaders as well as U.S. Ambassador to Japan, Caroline Kennedy. Ambassador Kennedy spoke in admiration of the Garden’s work to return the kasagi saying “These people are cultural ambassadors for America.” Continuing, she reflected on the commonalities of the two countries with the poignant observation that “the Pacific Ocean is not something that divides us but is something that connects us.”

For the last leg of their travels, the kasagi were taken northward in October to celebrate a homecoming in Okuki village. Village elders and school children alike congregated around the kasagi to marvel at their journey, grateful that these lost sacred artifacts—presumed lost for so long—had been returned home.

- 1  Natsuko Takahashi
- 2  To-o Nippo, April 2, 2015
- 3  Ken Katsurayama



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*Priest Kudo Kazuyoshi blessing the reinstatement of the two kasagi to their original location in Okuki village outside Hachinohe*



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*There now stand three torii gates in front of the Itsukushima Shrine outside Hachinohe: one which was erected after the tsunami and the two original torii which have now been returned*

## HOPE AND HEALING NEED NO TRANSLATION

The Portland Japanese Garden—like many Japanese gardens around the country—was originally established as an expression of friendship. Coming on the heels of World War II, building the Garden was much more than an urban beautification project. The Garden’s ability to communicate cultural understanding allowed the emotional rebuilding that was needed to heal and move forward.

What has made the Japanese Garden’s expression of friendship so enduring is its ability to transcend language, as it is with any pure expression of beauty and kindness. When hope and healing are at the heart of a project, its message of goodwill is felt on a fundamental human level.

For anyone involved with the kasagi project, this has been the lingering sentiment.

To celebrate the next chapter of this story, a delegation of 27 people from the U.S. traveled to Hachinohe. The group included Garden Administration, Garden Board members, Oregon State Representative Jennifer Williamson, donors and supporters, and of course, Uchiyama himself who was greeted at the train station by an NHK crew, once again there to document this special journey.

On the day of the rededication, the chilly wind whipped off the northern coast as the sun shone down warmly on the crowd. It seemed to be a metaphor for all who sat there and felt the mixed emotions of the day.

Americans and Japanese stood side by side remembering the profound loss brought from the 2011 Great East Earthquake of Japan. It was clear that although recovery has been steady, it is a daunting task that will take decades and generations of effort to complete. Still, the resilience of the human spirit abounds in every corner of the country. And the ceremony reflected that this was also a time of healing and joy. The hope this return imparted was stated by Hachinohe Mayor Makoto Kobayashi saying, “This effort has brought great joy to the people of Hachinohe and helps us realize that recovery is indeed possible.”

One thousand cranes made from origami paper, each with a unique well wish written by visitors at the Portland Japanese Garden

The local head priest solemnly blessed the sacred artifacts and then invited notable people involved in the project to the altar to bestow their offerings for the well-being of the kasagi. Representatives from the U.S. and Japan spoke words of gratitude and friendship to everyone involved. Finally as the Americans packed up to leave Hachinohe, both they and the Japanese present all agreed that this was not goodbye but was instead the beginning of a new and special friendship.

Put simply, Mr. Masanori Takahashi summed up what all who were there felt. “This might be a small gate in a small village. But it has become a great bridge that connects our two countries, today and for the rest of our lives.”

## A LESSON OF HOPE

Before the kasagi were sent home, both were displayed in the Garden where visitors could honor them with well wishes written on origami paper. Nearly 2,000 wishes were collected and taken to four international schools throughout Portland. Working with the Japanese language immersion classes (2nd–5th grade), the story of the kasagi was shared as part of their curriculum. The classes then used the origami paper to fold 1,000 cranes in keeping with *Senbazuru* (千羽鶴), the ancient Japanese legend promising that anyone who folds a thousand origami cranes will be granted their wish. Those cranes were sent back to Japan and included in the final May rededication ceremony.

### Thank you to these children:

Portland Japanese School / ポートランド日本人学校

The International School Japanese Heritage School of Portland /  
ポートランド日本語継承学校

Sakura Kai / さくら会



- 1 Photo courtesy of the U.S. Consulate General of Sapporo
- 2 Dorie Vollum
- 3 Kaori Panaia

3



📷 Dorie Vollum

To honor the people who returned the kasagi, the people of Hachinohe had the name "Portland Japanese Garden" inscribed on the back of the rededicated torii gates. This was the first time the carpenter Mr. Suetako Takekomo had ever carved an inscription in English.

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