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Barrier free, border free□□障壁もなく、国境もなく

Jon Mitchell

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Disabled artist Kimura Hiroko's life-long battle to break boundaries and build bridges.

Jon Mitchell

One afternoon in the mid-1980s, Kimura Hiroko was taking a rest from sightseeing on a park bench in Adelaide, southern Australia. As she was enjoying the warm sunshine, she spotted the words "Japs go home" carved into the wood. This was the height of the bubble years and Kimura was aware that some people resented Japanese companies buying up Australian land, but she hadn't known the hatred ran this deep. "From that moment on," she says, "I made up my mind to do something to bring together Australian and Japanese people."

For anybody else, such a decision probably would have been forgotten as soon as they returned to their daily lives. But when Kimura sets her heart on achieving something, it's very hard to dissuade her. Take for example, the time she resolved to teach herself to read and write. Then there was the moment she decided to become a professional artist. Not forgetting when, at the age of 18, she taught herself how to walk.



The author with Kimura

Kimura Hiroko was born in Japanese-occupied Manchuria in 1937. Her father had been a middle school teacher in Yamaguchi Prefecture but, in the patriotic stampede to build the empire, his family convinced him to enroll in the military and he was billeted to a base town in China. By all accounts, he was a reluctant soldier who, instead of waging war, much preferred to play peek-a-boo with his healthy new baby.

For the first year of her life, Kimura showed no signs of being disabled, but then one day she developed a 40-degree fever which persisted for a week. At the time, doctors attributed this to influenza. In reality, it was the first indications of the cerebral palsy which would wrack Kimura's body with spasms for the rest of her life and leave her with control over only her left foot.

In 1939, Kimura's father was killed in battle. Her mother brought her back to her parents-in-law's farm in Yamaguchi where she worked long days tending fields and making charcoal.

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"Most of the produce went directly to the government," recalls Kimura in her autobiography, *Life on the Left Toes*. "The war had already taken away my father. And now it was to take away all the happiness left for my family."

In the summer of 1945 - when rumors were rife that the Allies were poised to invade Kyushu - a Japanese soldier paid a visit to the Kimuras' house. Warning her mother that the disabled child would soon be a burden on them all, he handed her a bottle of poison. Kimura's mother waited until the soldier had left, then she packed up their bags and fled with her into the hills where they sat out the final days of the conflict.

The post-war years were hard for the Kimuras and their rural neighbors. But as her mother continued to toil hard in the fields and at the kilns, she carried her daughter strapped to her back and kept up a constant stream of conversation, as though she were an able-bodied child. Until the age of eight, Kimura didn't fully realize how different she was from the other village children going to school. Then, one afternoon, she asked her mother why she couldn't join them and her mother replied that there was something wrong with her arms and legs. At the time, disabled children were not usually given an education, but Kimura's mother was committed to keeping the possibilities for her daughter as wide as possible. Even though Hiroko would never be admitted to school, she bought her a knapsack; despite Hiroko's inability to use her hands, she gave her a set of pens and pencils. Over the next several years, she kept encouraging her daughter to talk and she taught her how to read.

For a while, her mother's love insulated her from many of the prejudices against disabled people, but when Kimura was 13, her mother died and she was taken in by relatives. During the next three years, she was treated in a manner all too familiar to disabled people in the 1950s - regarding her as a guilty secret to be hidden out of sight, her relations shut her in a cupboard-sized room where summer saw her defenseless against clouds of mosquitoes, and in winter she shivered beneath thin blankets.

Abandoned like this for over two years, her thoughts grew increasingly dark until Kimura came up with a plan. One day, she waited for her relatives to leave for work, then she dragged herself across the yard to a shed. There, she knocked over a bottle of pesticide, unscrewed its cap with her teeth and did what the soldier had urged during the war. "I was sure my mother would be waiting with a gentle smile somewhere in the next world," explains Kimura in her autobiography. The poison didn't kill her, however, and when she woke up in hospital, she was surprised to find that her near-death experience had fostered in her a new will to live.

The first thing that Kimura pledged to do was learn to read and write. Her mother had taught her the fundamentals, but Kimura was hungry for more. Turning the pages with her left foot, she worked her way through the entire dictionary before moving on to more challenging books including, over the years, the Bible and works by Lenin and Fukuzawa Yukichi. At the same time, she trained herself to hold a pencil between her toes. "After about two months, I was able to write an awful scrawl of five lines on letter paper."

Walking was much more difficult. Due to her palsied limbs, doctors maintained that she would never be able to stand, let alone move by herself. Kimura was determined to prove them wrong. It took her eleven full days to rise out of her wheelchair, then three months of hard practice to totter a meter. Her constant falls left her covered in cuts, scars and orange splashes of antiseptic cream, but one year later, she was able to walk unassisted - an achievement that broadened her world

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infinitely and allowed her to pursue the next stage of her life: poetry.



Determination: Learning to walk

At first, the teachers and classmates at the *tanka* workshop she attended were skeptical of her abilities. After reading her first few verses, they changed their minds. While Kimura's poems adhered to the strict conventions of the *tanka* form, they also combined a heartrending commentary of the injustices meted out by able-bodied society with a poignant sensuality unheard of in disabled people's writing at the time. One poem reads: "If only they used for the handicapped / The money spent on just one rocket… / My friend said smiling a wry smile / And rubbing her benumbed leg." While another read: "The smell of the soap / Makes me feel a pain / Tonight on my breasts / That have never known caress."

Despite winning acclaim for her writing, Kimura knew that she would not be able to survive financially through poetry alone. She learned that there was to be a workshop in a nearby town where disabled people would be taught to use knitting machines. Seeing this as an opportunity to support herself, she applied to enter the center. When she met with the director, though, he turned down her application on the grounds that she was too impaired ever to be able to knit. Accustomed to such reactions, Kimura returned to the center the next day - only to receive the same rejection. When she was still turned down on the fifth day, she staged a 96-hour sit-in outside the workshop, which finally convinced the director of her determination.

Over the next months, Kimura learned how to operate a knitting machine with her left foot. It took her a year and a half to master the technique and when she reached the stage where she could produce a finished sweater, journalists visited the workshop and ran stories on her success. For Kimura, however, the experience taught her an opposite lesson. "What an ordinary person can do in a day takes me four or five days. I cannot make a living this way." Reluctantly recognizing the limits to her independence, she admitted herself into an institution for disabled people.

It was here among "the street beggars, the feeble-minded, the blind, chronic alcoholics, near-lunatics" that she experienced the very worst of what government care entailed. Residents fought over food, they lay for days in their own waste and died without anybody to mourn for them. "I am being tended / In this hellish institution, / My dream to live faithful to myself / Having been broken to pieces."

Kimura managed to persuade the doctors to transfer her to a different institute, but she found her new environment just as soul sapping. The staff ruled over residents with rigid regulations which dictated what they could eat, when they could visit their fellow patients' rooms and - most pernicious for a reader and writer as avid as Kimura - what time the lights had to be switched off. "My friend who is comforting me / Is also lamenting / Over our youth being broken to pieces / By cold and inhumane rules."

The longer Kimura stayed, the more she felt

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her earlier gains slip away. Three and a half years after entering the institution, she realized she would have to do something before she became like the listless patients she saw around her. Announcing to the staff that she was just heading across the road to a nearby meeting hall, Kimura left the institution. Her true destination was rather further than she'd admitted - half the country away in Chiba.

After an arduous three-day trip by local train, Kimura arrived at the home of Takagaki Kinji, a man with cerebral palsy who was at the forefront of a campaign to encourage disabled people to live as independently as possible. Over the next months, Takagaki and his wife taught Kimura to cook, clean and - most importantly - go to the toilet for herself. Her sense of liberation at having achieved this, an act that most able-bodied people take for granted, is obvious in the following poem: "When I eased nature all alone / For the first time in my life, / The word 'impossible' went out of my vocabulary."

The Takagakis rekindled Kimura's passion for life and she was determined to keep expanding her horizons. In 1964, she spotted an advert for a *haiga* class and she decided to attend. *Haiga*, a form of art that combines poetry and painting, was not entirely new for Kimura who was already an accomplished writer. However, painting was a skill which she'd never attempted before. For half a year, she practiced without any improvement, but then she met a struggling, elderly artist. "Here was another man fighting against his destiny. Even at his age, he would not throw away his brush." Inspired by his dedication, Kimura painted constantly during the following months, gradually becoming more proficient. She drew children, flowers and landscapes in a style she describes as "very direct, raw and passionate." Although she often claims to have "little artistic ability", other people disagreed and her paintings gained the attention of the International Association of Mouth and Foot Painting Artists. In 1967, she was accepted as a member by the Europe-based organization - which meant that her paintings would be reproduced worldwide on calendars and cards, conferring her a share of the profits. At the age of 29, Kimura achieved a degree of financial stability of which she had only dreamed.





Paintings by Kimura Hiroko Courtesy of the International Association of Mouth and Foot Painting Artists

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In 1969, Kimura married. Her husband was disabled - though not as severely as she - and it was not long before she was pregnant. During this time, it was common practice to sterilize disabled women (often against their will), and Kimura experienced a great deal of resistance trying to find a hospital that would help her to give birth. For three months, she was turned away by countless doctors - each of whom urged her to terminate the pregnancy. Finally, Kimura found a clinic in Hiroshima presided over by Dr Nakamoto Masako. The doctor was a survivor of the city's atomic bombing and she empathized with the prejudicial treatment Kimura had experienced.

On July, 11th, 1970, Kimura gave birth to a baby girl who shared neither of her parent's disabilities. "The moment my child / Gave the first cry, / I could not even open my eyes / Because of deep emotion."

As Kimura nursed her new daughter, Dr Nakamoto urged her to raise the girl to fight discrimination - not only against disabled people, but against burakumin and the Hiroshima and Nagasaki hibakusha. Kimura had already started to campaign for the rights of disabled people, but the doctor's words encouraged her to redouble her efforts.

Two years after the birth of her daughter, Kimura divorced her husband. She cited the main reason for the separation as "he never tried before or after the marriage to understand the spirit of 'Tsuchi no Kai' (The Association of the Earth)." Kimura had set up the group in 1966 partly from the painful memories of being locked away by both relatives and institutions, and also as a way to put into practice the lessons she'd learned from the Takagakis. The aim of Tsuchi no Kai was that "handicapped people should live independently with the cooperation of non-handicapped people."

Unlike other groups which sometimes shunned able-bodied members, Kimura's organization was true to its name - just as the earth indiscriminately absorbs the rain and sun, it accepted everyone regardless of race, gender or ability. In a converted storehouse in Yamaguchi prefecture, a diverse range of people gathered with a common belief that through comprehension and cooperation, they could help one another to live. Accompanying the bedrooms and dining room, Kimura devised the "Seikatsu Kunrenjo" - a special training space for disabled people to practice the myriad daily chores necessary for independent living.



Kimura with friends from Tsuchi no Kai

While Tsuchi no Kai succeeded in helping scores of disabled people become more self-reliant, the rest of the world was slower to change. The point was forcefully driven home to Kimura when she found herself turned away from a Kyoto hotel whose owner claimed they weren't equipped to deal with disabled people. Vowing that others would not suffer the same embarrassment, in 1983, Kimura established "Tsuchi no Yado" ("The Inn of the Earth") on Iejima, a small island off the coast of Okinawa Hontou.

The reason why Kimura chose Japan's

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southernmost prefecture to locate her inn was largely due to the kindness of Ryukyu University professor, Torii Tsugiyoshi. The grandfather of a boy with cerebral palsy, Torii translated "Life on the Left Toes" into English and helped her to win support from among Iejima's residents for the creation of Tsuchi no Yado. With the help of Okinawan civil rights and anti-base leader, Ahagon Shoko, Kimura and Torii envisaged an inn that would welcome guests from all backgrounds while also teaching them about the sufferings experienced by the people of Okinawa both during and after the war.

The inn, designed by an architecture student in lieu of his graduation thesis, captures perfectly Kimura's all-embracing vision. Its walls are open to the elements, there are two large communal rooms and it is fully wheelchair accessible with ramps, low-set light switches and a two-tier stove and sink so people of all abilities can cook together.



A traditional *shisa* guardian deity watches over the inn at Iejima

The student who designed the building apparently passed his course with top grades. "He also ended up marrying one of our staff," Kimura explained with a laugh when I met her in August 2010. "To date, I've seen over fifty couples tie the knot after meeting here at Tsuchi no Yado."

These statistics reflect Kimura's magnetism, says Julie Rogers - the co-writer of "Peace on Wheels", a documentary on Kimura's art and life. "She is very good at creating a platform which allows people from different realms to come together through the daily tasks of eating, cooking - and, of course, just talking. Hiroko is very fond of the phrase, 'tomo ni ikiru' - it's through living together that we learn about life."

This shared sense of community was what Kimura wanted to replicate when she saw the hateful graffiti on the park bench in Australia. "Reading those words, I wondered what I could do. I didn't only want to help by painting - I wanted to create a space where Japanese and Australian people could communicate openly."

In one of the fortuitous encounters which Kimura seems to naturally generate, she met an Australian man in Adelaide who shared her ambition. "Max Jellie had been stationed in Japan as part of the Allied occupying force," explained Kimura. "He hated war and so he wanted to help build a peaceful place, too. Without his help we couldn't have built Tsuchi no Yado in Australia."

Through the efforts of Jellie and his wife, Phyllis, Rogers and countless other volunteers and helpers, Kimura navigated the plethora of planning permissions, fire inspections and red tape necessary for opening a bed & breakfast in Australia. It would take over two decades and they encountered several near-calamitous setbacks along the way, but finally in 2004 an Australian branch of Tsuchi no Yado opened in the Adelaide Hills.

"The Australian Tsuchi no Yado isn't a place where guests hide away in their rooms," explains Maria Catanzariti, the current

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manager. “There’s always something going on - whether it’s games, cooking workshops or music lessons. If we have Japanese guests, the Australian staff teaches them about our country and we learn a lot from them, too.” Catanzariti, who has muscular dystrophy, says that approximately 25% of their guests are disabled and their interactions with able-bodied visitors help everyone to better understand one another.



The Australian Tsuchi no Yado [Photograph by Prabhu Acharya]

Although she is based in Okinawa, Kimura makes the 18-hour journey to Adelaide as often as her health allows. When I met her, she’d just returned from a month-long trip. This time, she’d taken along a party of Iejima school children in order to promote interest in foreign cultures. It seemed to work - throughout my stay at the Okinawa inn, they bombarded me with questions about my own country and a 15-year old boy told me he’d learnt so much about environmental issues in Adelaide that he was thinking of studying them in the future. Kimura ensures that such cultural exchanges are not a one-way street. Rogers recalls the story of one Australian youth who’d gone off the rails. Kimura brought him to Iejima for a month where life among the island’s coral reefs, goats and sugar cane fields seemed to straighten him out.



Kimura gives a talk at the Australian Tsuchi no Yado [Photograph by Prabhu Acharya]

Stories such as these suggest that Kimura’s vision is finally bearing fruit. Currently, there are plans to expand the Australian inn and the Okinawa property is often fully booked with foreign backpackers, university students and people interested in Kimura’s continuing struggle to win a fair deal for those with disabilities. In these economically-troubled times, success stories are rare and I wonder whether the inns’ achievements are not despite these problems, but because of them. The recent months of redundancies, repossessions and restructuring have revealed to many of us the limits of our own lifestyles. So it should come as no surprise that many people are searching for a more compassionate model of community where, no matter what our abilities, together we can share our strengths and overcome our individual weaknesses - in Kimura’s words: “tomo ni ikiru.”

Hiroko Kimura can be contacted via the Okinawan Tsuchi no Yado, 2300-5

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The inn's website can be found here.

The address of the Australian Tsuchi no Yado is 19 Johns Lane, Hahndorf, South Australia. 5245. Tel: +61 08 8388 1327. Website. More of Hiroko Kimura's art can be accessed via the International Association of Mouth and Foot Painting Artists website at vdmfk.com.

For information about "Peace on Wheels", a documentary on Kimura's life and art, visit peaceonwheels.net Alternatively, email Julie Rogers or Prabhu Acharya at peace@peaceonwheels.net

Jon Mitchell is a Welsh-born writer based in Yokohama. He has covered Okinawan social issues for both the Japanese and international press - a selection of which can be accessed at jonmitchellinjapan.com. Jon currently teaches at Tokyo Institute of Technology. Homepage: jonmitchellinjapan.com

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