

Susan Ott Ralph, M.D. Professor University of Washington Seattle, USA

Dr. Susan Ott Ralph received her M.D from the University of Washington and is a Board-Certified Physician. She has over 48 years of experience in the field of medicine as both a professor at the University of Washington and physician at the University of Washington Medical Center. Her research interests are in the effects of bisphosphonates on bone quality, effects of contraceptives on bone density and fracture rates, and osteoporosis. She is currently a docent at the Seattle Japanese Garden.



1. How did you learn about Green Legacy Hiroshima, and what were your thoughts about its efforts for a nuclear weapons free world?

I was visiting the San Diego Japanese Garden, where I saw a tree labelled "Peace Tree". Their plaque told about Green Legacy Hiroshima. I thought that it was a wonderful idea, and when I returned home I looked it up and sent an email to ask if we could join.

2. Please share with us your life trajectory and why you chose to work in the field of medicine?

When I was 14 my girlfriend and I were reading a romance novel about a candy striper (teenage hospital volunteers, who wore red and white striped uniforms in those days). She lived close to the university hospital and discovered that 14 was the age limit for becoming a volunteer. We signed up, but there wasn't much romance: we were assigned to fold linens to go into the autoclave. However, I felt like I belonged in the hospital, and by the

time I finished high school I had worked a record-setting 941 volunteer hours. After college I returned to medical school at the same university hospital. Again, I went to California for a residency and returned for specialty training in nephrology, then joined the faculty, and have been here ever since. In academic medicine we combine scientific discovery with teaching and taking care of patients. I became very interested in bones and the diseases that can make bones weak. This is especially true for patients who have kidney disease. I have worked on studies of the density of bone and have examined bones under the microscope, and worked with other doctors to test new medications to reduce fractures. We all know how terrible radiation from atomic bombs can be, but strangely, tiny doses of radiation can be used to measure the bone density and help decide how to prevent bone fractures. One of my favorite aspects of this career is meeting people around the world who do similar research. A few years ago I was on an international committee to recommend treatment for bone disease in people

with kidney disease. The committee members came from Europe, Australia, Brazil, Japan, and the USA. We all shared the same goal of treating bone disease, regardless of any political differences among our countries.

3. What was the motivation to volunteer at the Seattle Japanese Garden and plant the GLH sapling there?

You might wonder what my career has to do with a Japanese Garden. That leads to the answer to your third question. I am getting past retirement age and ready to cut back on the time in the clinic. A friend of mine was a volunteer docent for the Seattle Japanese Garden. We ran into each other at a gift shop for our church because I had been giving them wrapped stones I made. She was reminded of the *seki-mori ishi*, the "guard stones" that are gentle "please do not go this way" signs used in Japan. She persuaded me

to take the docent training. I agreed, partly because it was so very different from anything I had done before. I knew nothing about Japanese gardens, nor really much about Japan, and I had not appreciated how much the internment of Japanese citizens during World War II had impacted that community. I have learned a lot since then, and still have much to learn.

When I wrote to GLH, I hoped we could have a sapling to plant at our



Planting ceremony with Jane Stonecipher, Director of the Arboretum Foundation, Susan Ott Ralph, Consul General of Japan Hisao Inagaki and his wife Yukiko.



garden's 60th anniversary. When the garden opened, the Crown Prince and Princess of Japan visited the garden, and the Princess planted a tree, which is still growing in our garden. But currently the laws about importing saplings are so strict it was not feasible. Azar Azimi, Nassrine's mother, then said she would give us a sapling that was growing in her yard in San Diego, if I could arrange transportation. So another docent and I went down to San Diego and drove the sapling all the way north to Seattle, where it was planted exactly 60 years after Princess Michiko planted her tree.

4. How effective do you think efforts like GLH are, in spreading awareness about peace especially for the youth?

I hope efforts like GLH will spread awareness and peace, and hope. Here in Seattle, I already have noticed some things. For example, four different organizations play roles in this garden: the city of Seattle (who owns the land), the University of Washington (who owns the plants around the garden), the Arboretum Foundation, who helps manage the garden and programs for visitors, and the garden docents, who give tours and help support the programs. These organizations will sometimes argue with each other, but when I proposed joining GLH and described their mission, I saw 100% agreement. Everybody thought it was a meaningful idea and wanted to help, so the meetings were totally



Azar Azimi (left) and Susan Ott Ralph (Right) with the Ginkgo sapling.

cooperative. People want these symbols of peace and hope in their lives. When we planted the tree, the mayor of Seattle, the director of the parks department, the Consul General from Japan, and the director of the Arboretum Foundation all "pitched in" to talk at the ceremony and plant the tree.

Because of COVID we have not had our school children visit the garden, but we are hoping that this will resume next year. I can tell you that one of the docents said her daughter's favorite tree was the little ginkgo tree from the seed of a plant that survived the atom bomb. The children learn about the garden and about some Japanese traditions, like the Tanabata Festival. I think it is important for people to learn about other cultures, because we don't always understand each other, and that leads to conflicts. Despite differences, we all want the same basic things in life,

and hope for a peaceful future is one thing we have in common.

5. What has been the impact of the Seattle Japanese Garden on the community, especially in storing and sharing of plant species?

The Seattle Japanese Garden gets many visitors every year, usually because people want to experience the peace and beauty of the garden. There are many Japanese people who live in Seattle, still some are living who experienced the incarceration during the war. This loss of civil liberty should not be allowed to happen again. One of the original reasons for building the garden was to show support for the Japanese people who had moved back to Seattle.

The Seattle Japanese Garden is in the University of Washington Arboretum,

and there are many plant species from around the world. The botanists also do studies about plant infestations and climate change. I'm still learning about all the other things they are researching. Raymond Larson, the curator of Living Collections and the Otis Douglas Hyde Herbarium, part of the University of Washington Botanic Gardens has been helping me with the Green Legacy Hiroshima seeds. He has experience in dealing with the US Customs, and I don't think I could have managed all the red tape without his help. He and his staff are growing the seedlings in their green houses.

Feature edited by Saeeda Razick of GLH



Raymond Larson, Curator of Living Collections and the Otis Douglas Hyde Herbarium, University of Washington Botanic Gardens, with GLH Ginkgo