

Oregon State Penitentiary Oregon, USA

The Oregon State Penitentiary (OSP) is Oregon's oldest prison. Founded in Portland in 1851 while Oregon was still a territory, it relocated to its current location in east Salem in 1866. Until 1959 it served as the state's only place for imprisoning criminals. Today, it is one of 12 state-run penal facilities across Oregon. About 12,000 people are serving time in Oregon prisons. Some 2,000 with sentences longer than a year are housed at OSP. Asian Family Pacific Club (AFPC) is an adult in custody club at the Oregon State Penitentiary that provides opportunities for its members to learn and develop individual skills as well as to celebrate their diverse heritages. The club partnered with Japanese landscape designer Hoichi Kurisu to build a Japanese healing garden at the penitentiary which was self-funded. It is also the only prison in the world where a Hiroshima peace tree has been planted.

Peace comes to a penitentiary

A maximum security prison is likely the last place you'd expect to find a peace tree. Nor would you expect to find a large Japanese-style garden. But enclosed within the walls topped by barbed-wire of the Oregon State Penitentiary (OSP) is an expansive garden designed by one of the United States' leading designers of Japanese gardens - Hoichi Kurisu. The story of the garden and its creation is intimately connected to the story of the peace tree coming to the penitentiary.

Kurisu-san was a small boy in Japan when he witnessed the mushroom cloud over Hiroshima. He emigrated to the U.S. in the 1960s and has been designing gardens in the Japanese style for 50 years. In 2019 he took on the garden project at OSP at the invitation of members of the prison's Asian Pacific Family Club (APFC), who planned and fundraised for the garden.

In the garden Kurisu designed, amid carefully placed boulders softened by azaleas and coral bark maples, Koi swim lazily in a large, curving pond. Meanwhile, men in prison blue move quietly about, tending to the paths and plants with meticulous care.

That a garden even exists inside this prison is thanks to a management policy called the Oregon Way. Adopted after extensive visits to study the prison system in Norway, the aim of the policy is to normalize an individual's environment and create humane conditions and interactions while a person is incarcerated. This is believed to create safer prisons and communities because released inmates are more successful at re-entering society and have lower rates of return to criminal behavior.

Jimmy Kashi is President of the APFC, a self-fund-

ed adults in custody (AIC) group that's has 150 members.

"What we do is strive to bring cultural traditions to our own people who are incarcerated, but also to bridge the gap between non-Asian Pacific Islanders inside the penitentiary. Our mission is to overcome differences and diminish boundaries. So that's what we tried to do here," says Kashi, whose been at OSP since 2008.

Bringing an A-bomb survivor tree to OSP

Fresh from the success of opening the Memorial Healing Garden at OSP, the APFC heard about Hiroshima peace tree seedlings being offered through a partnership between Oregon Community Trees and the Oregon Dept. of Forestry.

AIC Ernest Badilla, a Navajo and member of



OSP's club for indigenous people (the Lakota Club) was watching the news one night when he heard about peace trees being planted in Oregon cities.

"I thought, man, that'd be pretty cool to get one here at the prison. It just reminded me of a lot of classes that I've taken here, where they've always showed this picture of a flower coming out of concrete or stuff coming up out of ashes. No matter what we go through in life, or harm that we do, there's always something good that can come out of things. And it just kind of clicked."

A prison staffer looked up the article [about the peace trees] for him and helped him contact the Department of Forestry about getting a tree for OSP.

"The initial idea was to put the tree out in our sweat lodge area, where we have our Native American ceremonies. As I thought about it more, I thought, 'Well, I'm actually going to limit the amount of people that get to experience it because there's only so many of us that can go out there to the sweat lodge.' So then I asked the Asian guys -- because I don't want to be disrespectful to somebody's cultural beliefs -- I asked, 'How would you guys feel about getting this instead? Are you guys okay with this?'," remembers Badilla.

AFPC president at the time Toshio Takanobu first wanted to make sure their garden designer Kurisu would approve. When they found out he was a survivor from Hiroshima, a peace tree with origins

in the bombing seemed even more appropriate. So in late 2022, Takanobu and Randy Guzek (Healing Garden Director) submitted an application with designated attachments to the Oregon Dept of Forestry requesting that the OSP Memorial Healing Garden be graced with a Hiroshima Peace Tree.

"The connection between the Hiroshima peace tree and the creator of the garden is amazing. Mr. Kuriso, the designer of this garden is a hero, an atomic bomb survivor. So that to us means it comes full circle. The ability for us to have a tree in this space initially was intended to allow for the tie into the intent of this garden, which is healing. So for us, it was an awesome opportunity to be able to have that tree, to be stewards of that tree. That was important for us,"

says Kashi, who became president after Takanobu was granted clemency and released at the beginning of 2023.

OSP permitted APFC to get a peace tree, but for security reasons required that the tree -- which could grow 50' tall or more -- be planted outside the walls. But Kashi has adjusted his thinking about the placement. "I think that's where it's meant to be. Our visitors can see it out there and feel connected to us in here. So we're appreciative of that," he says.

Impact of the peace tree on its custodians

Kashi says that like GLH, "For us having a Hiroshima peace tree is about giving peace and healing to others. There's a prison population of 2,000

inmates at Oregon State Penitentiary. For us, it's a must. It's part of our mission and our vision to build community inside this space. The goal of prisoners is to get out of prison, it's not to get comfortable. But while we are here, we are able to serve our community, our OSP community, by doing works like this garden and the peace tree."

Badilla has stayed connected with the effort to get a peace tree at OSP, *"Bringing the tree to OSP helps me and I believe it helps staff. I feel connected, that my voice matters. Sometimes it doesn't feel that way. But it did for this idea. It mattered. And people were willing to listen. So it made me feel good, made me feel that I am still a vital part of life, even though I'm in here,"* Badilla says. *"It reminded me to feel like a human being, not just a prison number."*



Planting of the A-bomb tree at OSP in 2023

The garden and the peace tree have been personally important to Kashi as well.

"Prison is a place of concrete, steel and glass

in windows, but mainly concrete and steel. Those are very cold, hard materials. Being able to work with plants and nature gives us a connection back to our humanity. Being from the island of Saipan, the Pacific Ocean is our backyard. And the jungles, nature is all around us. So for me, being able to be around trees, the water, the pond, the fish, it just allows for me to connect back to things that are taken away due to the situation that we're in. But for us, and for me especially, it allows me to connect back to myself. I'm provided some sort of connection to the space, to the ground."

The garden's director is Randy Guzec, who has been at OSP since he was 18, much of that time in an isolation unit. He says, *"When the United States dropped the atomic bomb over Hiroshima there was nothing but destruction and chaos left in its wake. We often feel that when we first come to prison -- there is nothing but destruction and chaos. For the rest of our life."*

After the Oregon Department of Forestry delivered the Hiroshima peace tree to OSP, Guzec says the AICs collectively decided to put it in the healing garden until it could be planted on the outer grounds.

"So for 33 days -- one day for each year I was on death row -- this beautiful ginkgo without any leaves, got to be part of our family. And as I sat next to this peace tree and talked to it, it was awe inspiring to realize that it has a past, similar to ours," says Guzec. The Hiroshi-

ma peace tree remind us that, like a phoenix, we have the ability to rise from the ashes of our destructive behaviors, that we have the ability for change, that we have the ability for transformation, and hope, not just for ourselves, but for our communities, for our country, and for the world."

After the ginkgo was planted on April 6 on the grounds of OSP outside the walls, Randy tells the story about his mother, Kathleen, after she learned about the efforts of her son and other AICs to bring the peace tree and all it symbolized to OSP and have it serve as a point of connection with the wider world. When she visited the tree, her escort reported later that she bent down and whispered to it through her tears, *'Hello, I'm Randy's mom'.*

Nicole Hodgkin is a Dept. of Corrections staffperson who works directly with the APFC.

"The peace tree in itself is such a great gift to their families and to the community. It's a beautiful thing," she says. "I think being able to connect with their families on another level besides sitting in a visiting room is amazing and very thoughtful."

Kashi says APFC has big plans to tie the peace tree even closer to the work prisoners are doing in the healing garden inside the walls. "We're going to put benches and some signage out there so that visitors can know that the OSP has a Hiroshima peace tree through a collaboration with APFC and the memorial healing garden. We want to give them an opportunity to share a connection that's tied into our space inside. That's community building from our perspective."

Hodgkin and the OSP staff are supportive of the effort.

"The peace tree is a tree grown from a seed, and then it becomes something beautiful, and you watch it and you get connected to it," marvels Hodgkin.

"Something just that small can bring so much hope to so many guys, just one tree, or just one garden. It's like it's infectious. I hope that people in other prison systems would look at this and think, why not? Why wouldn't we do something like that, when it positively affects our community. After all, these guys are going to leave here and go back into the community. And they're going to want to build a garden, in their local park or in their backyard. Pass that love around. I think that's really something the world as a whole should look at."

Badilla sums up that transformative power of the peace tree by stating,

"I've seen guys in here that don't talk to anybody and are pretty grumpy. But yet, if they can get a little plant and grow it in their cell, they'll nurture that. They want it to grow. I see the power in that. And I'm hoping that is what transpires with the peace tree out front. When visitors and people see the peace tree, see that it interconnects us and makes us all feel like we're a part of this earth."

The following is from an interview with the President of the Asian Pacific Family Club at OSP, Jimmy Kashi.



1. How has being a member of the Asian Pacific Family Club impacted you and what does it mean to you?

When I got to Oregon State Penitentiary I was sentenced to 41 to life. As human beings we tend to stick together like a pack of animals. The Oregon state penitentiary has a population of about 50 Asian Pacific Islanders. That sense of community When I came in to Oregon State Penitentiary was immediate. The Asian Pacific family club and the AAPI community here has allowed me to be embraced and be to be a part of a family that's outside of my immediate family. I live a life where I have to be aware that I am separated from my family so the AFPC has allowed me to build community within this space for me, the AFPC is an important organization that allows for us to build a space for tradition and culture, where we can remain connected to who we are. There's also a great many of them that come into the penitentiary setting, not knowing their Vietnamese side, their Cambodian side or the Japanese side or Hawaiian side and then they come into this space and it's our responsibility to bring that to them and to definitely bring back a sense of community for them so that when they live in the prison, they become better humans.

2. What is the power that plants and nature have over us and what kind of impact can it bring in saving our planet and societies from destruction?

Seeing something grow in affinity in a penitentiary setting period for me is it allows for me to have hope from the trees and plants growing. You see the seasons and they grow and they change and then they develop and to take care of these plants inside this space allows me to be connected. To be honest with you that something that not a lot of us are. Not a lot of people have the opportunity to go outside of the Oregon State Penitentiary, The value of being able to come and decompress with plants and just to be in nature, you can hear the birds. The amount of nature that's come into this space. Since its inception is amazing. We have hummingbirds dragonflies, hawks, ducks, baby ducks, Koi fish, baby koi fish and the ability for us to see that. I'm 44 years old and as I get older I am going to appreciate life and the ability to see nature at its fullest. There's geese and migrating ducks and birds out here. So it's amazing the power of plants. And for nature as a whole is a key component to humans, I believe.

3. What are your thoughts on GLH and their efforts to spread peace through plants?

As second generation Japanese I'm definitely aware of some of the challenges that come with World War II, the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima as a US Army veteran I'm also aware of those sentiments and some people may feel that it may be negative or positive. In my opinion GLH is definitely spreading the awareness of peace for what has transpired in

the past. The ability for us to have this tree is sharing peace and for us it's definitely a reminder not to really reoffend or to grow from our mistakes and not repeat them.

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Feature edited by Saeeda Razick of GLH