

History of the Chicago Okinawa Kenjinkai

By Ikuko Nichols

In 1906, a 16 year-old young man, Tokujin Asato, traveled alone from Okinawa to Hawaii as a first generation immigrant. He later moved to San Francisco (about the time of the big earthquake) and then on to New York. In New York he attended English school at night while working as a dishwasher at the hotel and later as chauffeur for a wealthy family. After working various jobs in New York, he moved to Chicago where he would purchase a four-story building on the corner of Clark and Division Streets and open a small Japanese food market. In no time, he began to open his place to students and war brides from Okinawa. Soon, other Okinawans followed him and in short order, Chicago had a community of Okinawans. Out of this, the Okinawa Kyoyuu-kai* was created. (*Kyoyuu-kai = Friends of the same village / town).

Fast forward 1966 when twelve Chicago-based Okinawans gathered with their shamisen in one hand, and their foods of their motherland in the other. While they looked back with nostalgia and strengthened their friendship, the idea of Kyoyuu-Kai was reintroduced and the group that is known today as the Chicago Okinawa Kenjinkai was formed. (In 1988, the name was changed from Okinawa Kyoyuu-Kai to Chicago Okinawa Kenjinkai). Since then, the Kenjinkai has become an organization with over two hundred families with a purpose that is a part of the local community, welcoming members of all nationalities with an emphasis on educating future generations about Okinawan culture. In addition, a scholarship was established and recipients have studied the sciences, the arts and engineering. It is primarily due to the efforts of past and current members who have played a role in sustaining our organization's existence through cooperation, mutual assistance and dedication.

In order to perpetuate the beautiful Okinawa traditional culture for the next generation, we must strive with the spirit of togetherness and tenaciousness to maintain the Uchinanchu* identity with care. (*People from Okinawa)