



Sister Cities OKC Shines on International Stage

BY TAMARA HERMEN

If you can't travel to Brazil, China, Mexico, Peru, Russia, Rwanda or Taiwan, then the next best option is for the culture to come to you.

The interactive Sister Cities OKC program, featuring official interchanges with eight cities in these countries, is designed to bring this global education to Oklahoma City citizens.

The result is normally a feast of tastes, sounds and stunning visual elements, with lasting benefits.

Mary Blankenship Pointer took time to talk about the Sister Cities OKC program in the midst of her relentless work to process critical and timely Small Business Administration loans amid the pandemic. Pointer is Senior Vice President at Frontier State Bank and the current President of the Sister Cities OKC organization.

Above, Dancers with the University of Oklahoma Confucius Institute perform with scarfs

The timing to highlight the Sister Cities program, it seems, made sense for two reasons: the pandemic and separately, Oklahoma's excellence being recognized internationally.

"The benefits of being a Sister City is it gives you a deeper knowledge of other cultures and other people around the world," Pointer said. "Right now we have a crisis, a global crisis, that I think Sister Cities can help with."

Not only does the current state of world affairs during the pandemic depend heavily on country to country interactions, but the Sister Cities exchanges and interactions form links person to person, business to business and student to student. The framework is in place.

The Sister Cities International program was created in

1956 by President Eisenhower to lessen the chance of future conflicts. The official mission of Sister Cities International is to “promote peace through mutual respect, understanding and cooperation - one individual, one community at a time.” In short, the Sister Cities vision and infrastructure is beneficial on many levels.

Oklahomans supporting the Sister Cities OKC program have been hard at work building grassroots relationships and bridges. It is being noticed. Sister Cities OKC is currently shining on the program’s international stage.

International Recognition for OKC

The Sister Cities branch programs are where the many bonds continue to form and results are revealed. Oklahoma City has directly nurtured its program for nearly four decades and the results of this outreach are exciting.

Oklahoma’s interactive work with the Sister Cities program the past 45 years has culminated in an enriching program with dynamic partners.

Because of the progressive work of Sister Cities OKC, Pointer was appointed to the Sister Cities International board in the fall of 2019 to fulfill a term. In July of 2020, she will run for election to serve a three-year board position.

Additionally, Governor Bill Anoatubby of the Chickasaw Nation was unanimously selected to receive the



Top, Asian Night Market Festival festivities Above, Ambassador Jose Arturo Rodriguez Diaz, from the Guatemalan government Below, Traditional Mariachi musicians with Johnna Kirschner (left) and Mary Blankenship Pointer



2020 Sister Cities International Distinguished Leadership Award.

“This is a very, very prestigious award. It’s huge,” said Pointer.

Past honorees include Second Lady of the United States Karen Pence; United States Secretary of the Air Force Barbara M. Barrett; The Honorable Norman Mineta; New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson; Mayor Richard M. Daley; and Maryland Lt. Governor Kathleen Kennedy Townsend.

“Governor Anoatubby and the Chickasaw Nation have been supporters of Sister Cities OKC for many years. When Governor Anoatubby learns of a need he is always the first to quietly offer assistance,” said Pointer. “This year we received several highly qualified nominations from other board members. After reviewing Governor Anoatubby’s qualifications, the board unanimously selected Governor Anoatubby to receive the 2020 Sister Cities International Distinguished Leadership Award for his vision and leadership.”

Oklahomans at work on the Sister Cities program are being noticed on a global scale and at home. Programs in Oklahoma City are taking root and growing.

OKC’s Dynamic Sister Cities Heritage

The Sister Cities OKC program has long stood the test of time. With the guidance of vital community leaders and involved members throughout its



Oklahoma City Mayor David Holt with his children, Maggie and George, at the 2019 Asian Culture Celebration.

40-year history, the group has nourished and grown the relationships of eight Sister Cities. The Oklahoma City Sister Cities are Haikou, China; Puebla, Mexico; Taipei, Taiwan; Tainan, Taiwan; Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Ulyanovsk, Russia; Kilgali City, Rwanda; and Piura, Peru.

“The relationship is an agreement made Mayor to Mayor,” explained Pointer. “I would say the Mayor is the top guy.”

“The Sister Cities program is very active in OKC and I find the program and especially its events are a great way to connect with our immigrant community as well as the leaders and residents in our Sister Cities



Left, Mary Blankenship Pointer, President, Sister Cities OKC and Sharon Gou, University of Oklahoma Confucius Institute, during 2020 Chinese New Year celebration. Bottom, Lion dancers celebrating the Chinese New Year.



There are currently around 200 members of Oklahoma City’s Sister Cities organization. All members are invited to experience three free cultural programs a year, typically showcasing music, food, art and camaraderie from a specific city or region. The organization also annually sponsors the Global Achievement Awards banquet honoring local visionaries.

Pointer described how the organization has hosted a colorful Cinco de Mayo event at the River complex complete with Mexican food, a Mariachi



Sister Cities International OKC Global Achievement Award.

Band and tequila. Sister Cities OKC executed for its membership an elaborate presentation of culture at the Governor's pavilion by the Taipei Economic Cultural Office complete with costumes, artifacts, lovely fabrics, musicians playing beautiful instruments and singing in Taiwanese. Not to be forgotten is participation in the Asian District Night Market Festival and much more.

There is a lot to experience through the Sister Cities OKC program and the opportunities are growing.

Oklahoma City's first Sister City, Haikou, China, was established in 1981. In 2021, Oklahoma City is poised to celebrate its 40th anniversary with Taipei, Taiwan.

"Our most recent Sister City was signed in January, 2020. It is Piura, Peru. We had a trip planned in May to celebrate with the Mayor, Vice Mayor and Governor. Unfortunately, it will be postponed," Pointer said. "We are also planning a celebration for Taiwan in 2021."

The avenues of exchange with eight Sister Cities are varied, but each relationship is vital.

"For nearly 65 years, Sister Cities International has encouraged cultural, educational, informational, and trade exchanges between cities of similar size across the globe. For Oklahoma City, in particular, it has given us an opportunity to build partnerships, share ideas, and create lifelong bonds with citizens from around the world," said Mark Stonecipher, Oklahoma City's Ward 8 Councilman. "Not only has it exposed our citizens to a variety of different



Oklahoma City Mayor David Holt, left, meets in his office with dignitary Director General Peter Chen from Taiwan.

cultures, but it has given us a platform to spread the news of Oklahoma City's great renaissance across the globe."

Action and Interaction

Sister Cities OKC has demonstrated that its alliances are making an impact.

Several of the words used to describe this program in the informational literature include develop, provide, create, stimulate and collaborate.

"We want more excitement, said Pointer. "We want more discussion and conversation."

The fruits of this discussion and conversation bring a level of external feedback that would not otherwise be available. For example, Oklahoma Christian University opened a campus in Kigali in 2012 to offer a Master's Degree program in Business Administration. Alternately, students from Kigali have been attending Oklahoma Christian for many years.

Pointer also described her personal Sister Cities OKC interactions regarding business.

"In 2018, Nancy Hyde and I had the opportunity to travel to Kigali. We met with the Bank of Kigali to help negotiate a loan program for women-owned businesses," she explained. "We were able to tour approximately 12 businesses and help with their business plans. We participated in a panel discussion that approximately 50 women attended. Discussions included how to obtain business



US-China Mayor's Summit participants

loans, business plans, budgeting and accounting.”

Plans are in the works to begin exchanges with the most recently developed Sister City, Piura, Peru.

“We are working with the Honorary Consular Enrique Gabatta-Villar to travel to Piura, Peru,” she continued. “We had planned to travel in May to meet many dignitaries, the Chamber of Commerce, and business owners. An economic and educational exchange is anticipated in 2021.”

Although delays are being faced on many levels for millions of people due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the humanness of outreach and camaraderie can serve as an anchor.

Relationships Matter Now

“Right now with the COVID virus, we have a global problem, and I think Sister Cities is probably as important, if not more important, than it ever has been in the history since 1956,” Pointer said.

Pointer explained there has not been a major global conflict in the world since President Eisenhower created the Sister Cities. The pandemic disruption, however, is significant.

“Our mission is to bring people together for education, cultural and economic causes,” she said. “We can connect globally between our Sister Cities and use our education and economic resources to work together.”

“It is the communication. It is the education,” she said. “So if we have education here or best case practices here or wherever, we can share those best case practices and work together globally instead of in silos.”

Pointer cited some specific examples of sharing amid the pandemic. She explained, “the Chinese People’s Association



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Sister Cities OKC

Taipei, Taiwan

Population: 2 million

Program Initiated: 2/1981

Tainan, Taiwan

Population: 1 million

Program Initiated: 8/1986

Haikou, China

Population: 1.5 million

Program Initiated: 11/1992

Puebla, Mexico

Population: 4 million

Program Initiated: 10/1993

Ulyanovsk, Russia

Population: 700,000

Program Initiated: 6/1996

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Population: 6,323,037

Program Initiated: 2/2004

Kigali City, Rwanda

Population: 965,398

Program Initiated: 4/2011

Piura, Peru

Population: 484,475

Program Initiated: 1/2020



Women business owners in Kigali, Rwanda



At the Global Achievement Award luncheon with Merrill Eisenhower Attwater, center, who is the great-grandson of President Eisenhower, founder of Sister Cities International in 1956

of Friendship with Foreign Countries contacted the international Sister Cities office to provide face masks. Taiwan will donate two million hospital masks to the United States in an expanded effort to provide hard-to-find medical supplies to nations afflicted by the coronavirus pandemic.”

President Eisenhower possibly never imagined the medical crisis and international lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic in 2020. However, his vision of hope and exchange through the international and local Sister Cities programs still stands strong. Its philosophies may even ring truer and clearer today.

Boldness of Diversity

Sister Cities OKC is bold in magnifying international exchanges, displaying international customs and celebrating diversity related to its Sister Cities. These dynamic cultural connections result in creating a citizen network and awareness that cannot help but strengthen communities.

“Vicki Gourley invited me to join the board of Sister Cities six years ago,” Pointer said. “I discovered the mission of Sister Cities aligns with the principals that my family taught me — mutual respect, understanding and cooperation.”

To learn more about Sister Cities OKC membership and for more information visit <http://sistercitiesokc.org>. ■