

Still Beating After 100 Years



Courtesy of Rev. Shuji Komagata

As the booming of taiko drums resonates throughout Soto Mission of Aiea Taiheiji, Jay and Sharon Makabe, parents of six-year-old Noah Makabe, stretch their necks into a small classroom of the temple's retired Taihei Japanese School. They're mesmerized by the multitude of tiny hands—including Noah's—that awkwardly hold long wooden sticks that flail up and then cut through the classroom's thick humid air. The result is an impressive cadence of thunderous strikes that pound and tap all parts of the specially made taiko drums. Cara Koyanagi, parent of six-year-old Cole Koyanagi, peers through the semi-dusty jalousies of the same classroom and motions to her son to extend his arms straight out to "first position" after he finishes his taiko drum solo. "That's what they're supposed to do when they're done," Koyanagi says with a smile. "He's still learning but he's getting better at remembering."

Over a year ago, both Koyanagi and the Makabes Googled taiko groups for their sons to join. Somei Taiko at the Soto Mission of Aiea kept coming up in their search results. This along with word-of-mouth reassurances from their friends helped them to make the choice to go with

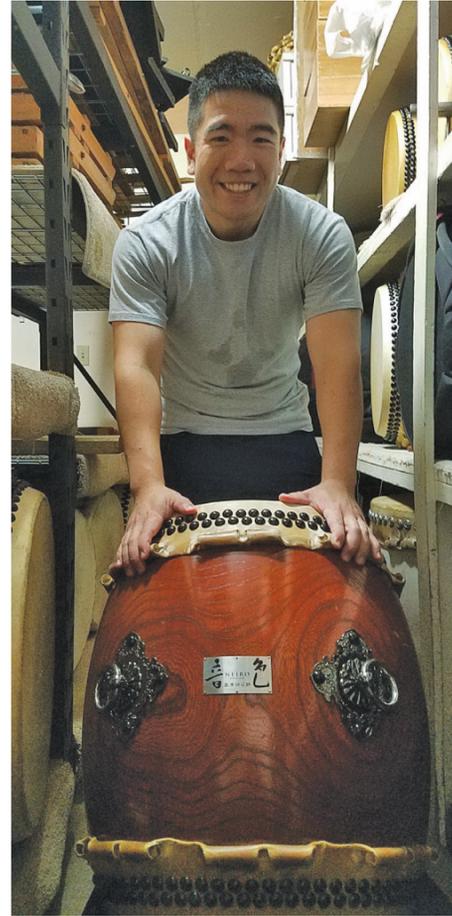
this group.

"It's a great way for [Noah] to learn about teamwork and make new friends," says Jay Makabe. "I also like that it's an activity that taps into his culture." Koyanagi likes the fact that Cole's participation in taiko gets him off of his electronic devices. "He does enjoy it," says Koyanagi. "I think he mostly looks forward to playing with his friends after they play taiko."



As the pounding continues, Jay Makabe signals a thumbs-up to Noah, while Cole gives his mother a side glance and a smile, with arms stretched out in "first position." The two six-year-olds look bored in between the lectures but become electrified once the pounding commences, with instructional assistance from Susan Tachino.

Meanwhile Kevin Tachino, Susan Tachino's son, is downstairs with temple members Sid Matsufuru, Danton Matsuda, and Kevin's father Gerald Tachino. Gerald Tachino, Matsufuru and Matsuda are a part of the self-proclaimed group known as Somei Taiko Equipment Maintenance Division (STEMD). Created by former Somei Taiko student Danny Kagehiro, the group is in charge of making and maintaining all of the taiko drums that



are used by Somei Taiko. At the moment they are hovering around a large freshly varnished empty wine barrel, which is hung up by a strand of rope to thick pipe fixtures from the ceiling above. They're about a third done with the barrel before it becomes one of their prized taiko drums. They are using a method of taiko drum making that was shared with them by Ray Nitta of the Kauai-based taiko group Taiko Kauai.

"It takes a couple of months to complete, but it's worth it, because it lasts a really long time," says Kevin Tachino, as he points over to some seasoned taiko drums. He taps the middle part of the

(Clockwise from top left)

Taiko performance at Soto Mission of Aiea Taiheiji Bon Dance 2018

Kevin Tachino with taiko drum imported from Japan

A wine barrel that will be made into a taiko drum

taiko drum, striking a deep base sound on the outstretched cowhide skin, and jokes that some of the drums are just as old as his time spent with Soto Mission of Aiea and Somei Taiko. "It's been over ten years that we've had this one. Yeah, you can tell we need to make a new one—when there's a hole in it."

Kevin Tachino then excuses himself to join the "adult" group, ranging in age from late teens to early 40s, who are sprawled out in two rows within the temple's main hall. Their extended limbs are sleek, angular, and on point as Rev. Shuji Komagata maestros their movements with his own taiko drum.

Rev. Komagata has played taiko since he was Cole and Noah's age. A local boy from Wahiawa, Komagata moved to Japan in 1994 to study with Kiyonari Toshi's Nihon Taiko Dojo. In 1996, he continued his training with Seiichi Tanaka's San Francisco Taiko Dojo. Then in 2001, Komagata moved back to Hawaii and became the head instructor of Hawaii Matsuri Taiko. With a strong family background in Buddhist teachings, Komagata carried his experience to the Soto Mission of Aiea, where he was ordained as the resident minister in June 2005. That same year, Komagata founded Soto Mission of Aiea's Somei Taiko with his wife Jaymie, and they also succeeded renowned taiko instructor Faye Komagata to become the leaders of Hawaii Matsuri Taiko, which is an elite performing group founded in 1984.

Along with meetings of STEM D and taiko classes for adults and keiki on Sundays, Soto Mission of Aiea Taiheiji also hosts *shizendo* (a type of aikido practice) classes on Mondays and Fridays, judo every Tuesday and Thursday, karate on Tuesdays and Saturdays, kendo classes on Wednesdays and Saturdays, blow darts on Thursdays and Saturdays, and karaoke on Fridays. It's a busy schedule for a 100-year-old temple, but don't expect it to slow down any time soon. Komagata is excited and grateful to open up the temple's doors to whoever would like to visit—if not to worship, to socialize and feel like a part of the community. "Having these classes available for the community is important for the morale of our society," Komagata says. "Time that our kids spend here and participate means less time for them on their phones or out getting into mischief."

After rehearsing with the Somei Taiko adult group, Komagata heads



upstairs to the temple for a break. As he leans back into the elongated front-row pew and soaks in the quietness of the incense-scented room, he takes his time to reminisce about the temple's historic past and what it feels like to lead its members into their 100th year. At 44 years old, he is the fourth generation of Komagata men to pursue a career in religious studies. Komagata's willingness to serve members at Soto Mission of Aiea was shaped by the values learned from his upbringing rather than expectations to carry on his family's legacy of ministerial service.

"We live in a world now where people have a choice to choose their own path rather than follow in the footsteps of their families," says Komagata. "Because of people's own interest, we have a lot of new members coming in, both young and old, and some who leave—and that's OK. The point is that we're open to everyone who'd like to learn more about Buddhism or those who seek to be a part of a community."

Komagata is modest as he notes that his time as the minister at Soto Mission of Aiea just happens to coincide with the temple's centennial celebration. Komagata dismisses any personal accolades about the temple's vibrant presence within the community and the national recognition of its taiko groups, and attributes the temple's achievements to its members and those who help out within the community.

"We have parents whose kids come and participate in the activities, and they're not part of the temple but they volunteer at fundraisers or help clean up at events—and to me, personally, that's what our mission is," Komagata says. "What I hope to pass on is a legacy that our temple would be proud of, and that includes allowing people to just come together and help each other out when we can—to be present and in the moment, to stop from our busy schedules and just enjoy each other."

When asked about what he'd like to leave behind for the next generation, Komagata asserts that it's not up to him. "I'm so grateful to be a part of this community and especially grateful to know that we're all in this together—this is not my temple, it's everyone's temple. And I hope to continue to bring our community and other communities together." 終

Soto Mission of Aiea Taiheiji's centennial celebration will be held at Dole Cannery on November 4th. For more information about tickets, call (808)488-6794 or email aicataiheiji@gmail.com.

(Clockwise from left)

Rev. Shuji Komagata

Taiheiji Kendo Club Taiko practice

Taiko practice