

Scott Dolfay and Seattle Unificationists Protest Persecution in Japan

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Unificationists set up a table at the Seattle Cherry Blossom festival to draw attention to the Japanese kidnappings.

Visitors ambling at a leisurely pace into Seattle's renowned Cherry Blossom Festival expected the sublime, and they got it, but there was also a jarring bump in the road for some. Past the gorgeous boughs, the *taiko* drums, the sushi deluxe, the kimonos, the origami, the exquisite bloom-arranging, and outside a bevy of booths exalting Japanese art was the paper-strewn protest table staffed by earnest-looking Unificationists. Above it a 20-ft banner screamed: "Stop Japanese Kidnappings Now!"

Protests are a skunk at the garden party of such an expo, the largest of its kind in the Pacific Northwest. The festival commemorates the gift of 1,000 cherry trees to Seattle by the Japanese government, and the spring blooms make a picture-perfect showcase for the city. Thousands come to admire Japanese culture, live performances, hands-on activities, food and games.



Yet, on three days at the end of April, the 26th to the 28th, a resolute squad of Unification Church volunteers led by Unificationist Seattle resident Scott Dolfay walked up to thousands of festival visitors strolling by the table to stop them with a simple question, "Have you heard about the kidnapping issue in Japan?"

Most hadn't. Yet, fact is that during the last 44 years in Japan, 4,300 or more followers of the Unification Church and hundreds of Jehovah's Witness have faced kidnapping and illegal confinement by their families and so-called "deprogrammers" hired to coerce them to renounce their faith.

Man with a Mission

Dolfay, a Seattle native, has made it his personal mission to protest at the Cherry Blossom Festival for three years. He mentioned to Unification News that his wife is Japanese and that their son was adopted from a family in Japan as well.

"Knowing the connection [between Seattle and Japan] and knowing that this is an important event for the Japanese government in Seattle, we decided to table here to shame the Japanese government into doing the right thing," he said. "While they're having all their dignitaries come by and the Japanese council come by, they can't ignore that we're here."

Dolfay and his team of eight volunteers asked passersby to sign a petition to the Japanese government demanding that Japanese authorities enforce the laws on the books that guarantee all Japanese citizens the freedom to practice their religion without fear of abduction or violent de-conversion attempts that can take years of imprisonment. Signatures are sent to the Japanese consul Consul General in Seattle with the request that she report it to the Japanese foreign ministry.



Festival goers learn about the kidnappings happening in Japan.

The persecution continues apace in Tokyo. Unification Church leaders have reported that two young members of the church in the last six weeks are suspected to have been victimized by deprogrammers. A 21-year old male senior in the College of Science and Engineering at Kanazawa University disappeared in April. In another case, a 26-year-old Hiroshima woman has been missing since March 29, 2013. These young adults may be the latest victims of a string of kidnapping crimes in which relatives abduct and confine adults in order to force them to abandon their chosen religion and leave their spouses or fiancés.

Whereas three days of hard effort last year in 2012 yielded 250 signatures, Dolfay reports that his team gathered more than 1,000 this year, and upwards of 75 percent of those approached by the team agreed to sign.



Volunteers ask passerby to sign a petition to send to the Japanese government.

Impact of the Protest

The protest apparently has rattled festival officials. “Three years ago when I asked the festival organizers to allow our table to be part of the official event, they politely said no,” Dolfay wrote in an email. “Therefore, we became a ‘free speech event’ near them. A man that is on the organizing board that I had never met until the second day, but had communicated with through email, came to our table. He was very nice saying we have a right to protest and that what is happening to our members should be stopped,” he added.

According to the festival official, “Because of how this issue is ruining the festival, the organizers are now pushing the consulate to deal with us directly. As he sees it, it is the responsibility of the Japanese government to talk to us,” Dolfay reported.



Japanese Unificationist, Rumiko Uezono (far left), spoke with festival goers about the kidnapping issues in Japan.

Among those who have escaped or renounced their faith, many have suffered Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Thousands have endured involuntary confinement, threats of physical, psychological, social, or financial deprivation and harm. Unificationist Toru Goto, a legal adult and Japanese citizen, was kidnapped and forcibly imprisoned for 12 years and 5 months from September 1995 to February 2008.

Though these cases have been reported to police authorities, only rarely do victims receive compensation or even their day

in court. Authorities typically respond to reports with the excuse that this is a “family matter” and perpetrators continue with their activities unhindered.

“I think [the kidnapping issue] is important because people shouldn’t be mistreated for their opinions,” says Unificationist volunteer Helen Downey. “People shouldn’t be held against their will for their beliefs. In democracies especially, people should be allowed to speak as they wish.”



Seattle native, Scott Dolfay (far right), asked thousands of people at the Cherry Blossom Festival a simple question, "Have you heard about the kidnapping issue in Japan?"

Rumiko Uezono, Unificationist and immigrant from Japan, took time out of her schedule to sit down and talk about this issue. She has lived in Seattle for 10 years. She was one of the few Japanese church members volunteering at the table. “This is a Japanese issue, but American brothers and sisters are working so hard. It makes me inspired to do this, too.”

Dolfay was asked what pushes him to do the table every year. “I can thank the Unification Church for my family. My wife is originally from Odawara, Kanagawa prefecture, and my son is adopted from Hiroshima,” he explains. He pauses, looks out across the pavement and the crowds of people. “I want [the Japanese Unification Church members] to know we’re trying to stop it. I want them to know we’re there for them.”



Dolfay and his team of eight volunteers gathered more than 1,000 signatures for a petition to send to the Japanese government.

I thanked him for his time and watched as he nodded, blinked away his emotion and walked over to a young couple stopping to glance at the banner. He had the petition clipboard in hand.

(Photos: Teddy Sylte)