

ORIGAMI, THE ART: Supporting the community and embracing a wider audience

April 15, 2011 By [BETH HILLMAN, Nichi Bei Weekly Contributor](#)

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Since the first Festival, the Mihara family — owners of Paper Tree, a paper specialty store — have offered free *origami* instruction as part of the Northern California Cherry Blossom Festival. The Mihara sisters, Linda and Vicky, have fond memories of teaching children to fold paper at the Festival — starting when they were kids themselves. Paper Tree, one of the oldest businesses in San Francisco's Japantown, is family run, and to the Mihara sisters, participating in the Festival is an important part of their commitment to the Japanese American community.

Nichi Bei Weekly: What's your role in the Cherry Blossom Festival?

Vicky Mihara Avery: We organize and host the *origami* exhibition and demonstration. We're the only ones who do an active demonstration with the public. We have different Northern California groups in, and they give their time to teach people, and they enjoy teaching and sharing *origami*...

Linda Mihara: Paper Tree provides the paper. We also have an exhibit in the same room. We've been doing it since the beginning. At that time, the emphasis was on kids teaching kids.

NBW: How did your family get involved in the Festival?

VMA: Our family has been in Japantown since the early 1900s. They had an import business, which my parents were involved in, and they imported Japanese goods. At one point, my dad didn't want to travel anymore, so they opened up a retail store, Paper Tree.



FAMILY OF FOLDERS — Linda Mihara (left) and sister Vicky Mihara Avery of Paper Tree share the art of origami with festival goers. photo courtesy of Vicky Mihara Avery

LM: So we've been a part of the community for a long time. Having been here since the beginning of the Festival, we were all behind it 100 percent. Our parents would go to all the groups, and my mom started the Tiny Tot contest, and continued to do the *origami*. It's a tradition that we've maintained.

NBW: *How has the Festival changed since you first started?*

VMA: It's certainly gotten bigger. In the beginning it was contained in the Japan Center because this area wasn't filled. It was created for the merchants to draw more people to come here, and then it just developed, and got bigger and bigger. And Japanese groups do make their way to come here during the Festival.

LM: Not only has it gotten bigger, but I've seen a change in the volunteers that have supported it, all the heads of the committees. A lot of the *Issei* unfortunately are long gone, so I'm seeing a transition to the *Sansei* and *Yonsei* heading the committees, which is neat to see. But it's also a little difficult, because it's a lot of work no matter which committee you're on.

VMA: It's what you hope for; you want the younger generation to come in and help. It's good to see kids involved.

NBW: *Linda, can you talk about your memories of being Cherry Blossom queen?*

LM: For the longest time, I didn't want to do it.

VMA: They were bugging me, and I said, "No, make Linda do it."

LM: One day I woke up and decided, I think it would be great to run. Being the only candidate who was born and raised in Japantown, it was a big deal to me, and I thought it was a great opportunity. The pageant was a great experience, pretty nerve-wracking. I did *origami* as my talent, with a nice *origami* presentation, which was kind of cool. Culturally, it was important to do that, also because I enjoy it. A great surprise that I won, and the whole community was behind me, and I felt the support for the whole year. I got to go to Japan, and that year the queen was invited to compete in the international contest, which is held in Sao Paulo, Brazil. There was a queen from Los Angeles, Seattle, New York, Toronto, Hawai'i. We went and competed against the girls from South America... The girl from Los Angeles won the title, and I won first runner up, so I got to go to Japan for another trip, and we got to meet Prime Minister Suzuki and be on national TV.

NBW: *What are some other favorite Festival memories?*

LM: You even drove a car in the Parade one year!

VMA: I did, huh. The funny thing is, I'm more of a tomboy, I was driving race cars, so one year, we had a nice Nissan 280Z, so I drove it in the Parade. Being here in Japantown, we do a lot for the Festival — the *origami*, she's a former queen — so when people needed to talk to someone, a lot of press would come to us. So we've had some opportunities to be on TV. I just have a strong memory of us sitting at a table when we started, just us as kids teaching kids, when the Festival was just starting to get under way. Just having a great time! Our family was so committed to the Festival that — it's the busiest time for merchants — but at one point, when my mom was doing the Tiny Tots contest and my dad was in charge of the festival, we actually closed the store because we were all so involved. It's the time you want to be

open, but we closed the store for a couple of years in a row. It's nice to continue the Festival and we hope to continue it on and on. We know it's inevitable that the Japan Center will be renovated, but if they do, they'll be in construction for three years, which means that the Festival will be impacted for three years, and the merchants will be displaced.

NBW: Why is the Festival important to you?

LM: To me, I consider this community my home and my family. Having the added element of it being a celebration of Japanese culture, and having been handed down the art of *origami* is something I enjoy doing and sharing. It's twofold: It's supporting the community, and it's a time when people outside the community can come in and learn more about Japanese culture.

VMA: The other element is that it allows a lot of nonprofits related to the JA community to participate — selling food at the bazaar, or presenting *ikebana*, dancing. It brings them back to the community. People have moved to other parts of the Bay Area, but they come back for the Festival.

LM: It's amazing how much energy the community puts forth to make this happen... It's fun because so many people get involved. Our friends really do enjoy sharing *origami*.

NBW: What's your favorite Festival food?

LM: I always have to get two things: *Imagawayaki* and the beef skewers from Nihonmachi Little Friends.

VMA: I have to get the Sakura Popcorn, a sweet salty popcorn with *furikake* and *senbei* in it. I was in the group that helped develop the recipe, and it's so good. And I have to say whatever Troop 29 is selling, because my son is in it.

NBW: What's your favorite Festival event, other than origami?

LM: *Bonsai*. I always look to see what the oldest tree is. Two years ago the oldest tree was 1,000 years old. They always surprise me.

VMA: I have to say the Parade because it's a fun thing to see. You know people in the Parade, and it's also very colorful.

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