


Honorary Consul of Japan to North Carolina David S. Robinson Builds Bridges Across Borders

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What is it like to be an honorary consul in North Carolina?

In a word, it is simply rewarding, says **David Robinson**, a partner with Maynard Nexsen in Raleigh and Japan’s sole diplomatic presence in North Carolina.

“Being Honorary Consul affords me an opportunity to observe and participate in really significant events in North Carolina’s engagement with Japan and other nations. Yes, I can repatriate the remains of a deceased person, and I have; but, I also give a lot of ‘bridge-building’ speeches, and I go to a lot of ribbon-cutting ceremonies – really happy things, generally. Every day is different, and every problem is different.”

Serving as Honorary Consul since 2015, Robinson has helped orchestrate many events over the past nine years. One special event took place on April 12, 2024, when Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and his wife Yuko Kishida visited North Carolina. Prime Minister Kishida’s tour of North Carolina occurred after he traveled to Washington on April 10, where he met with President Joe Biden and spoke to a Joint Session of Congress.



The Prime Minister arrives at RDU airport on April 12, 2024, where he is greeted by Robinson, Gov. Cooper, Japanese Ambassador Yamada, US Ambassador to Japan Emanuel, and Consul General and Mrs. Maeda.

Robinson was on the tarmac at RDU to greet the Japanese delegation in a red-carpet celebration when they touched down in a flight from D.C. As part of Prime Minister and Mrs. Kishida's itinerary in North Carolina, they dined at a luncheon at the governor's executive residence. It was the first time a foreign head of state had visited the governor's mansion.

Robinson was one of approximately 60 people in attendance, 30 of whom were Japanese, and 30 of whom were American. Rahm Emanuel, the U.S. Ambassador to Japan, Shigeo Yamada, Japan's Ambassador to the United States, North Carolina

leaders, and members of the Japanese delegation were also present. Several dozen reporters from Japan also accompanied the Prime Minister.

"It was epic," says Robinson.

"No foreign head of state had been to the Triangle in over 75 years; according to NCSU records, the president of Turkey visited N.C. State back in 1949. It truly was an honor for me both to help plan this visit and, along with my wife, to attend this state lunch featuring a level of pomp and circumstance that you don't typically see on a state level.

"The flags were perfect. The menu was perfect. The remarks were carefully choreographed," he continues. "The motorcade was choreographed by the Secret

Service, international protocol was followed as to who would sit next to whom and who shakes hands with whom, and when and for how long. It was very carefully planned. I have to give credit to North Carolina and to Gov. Cooper, the luncheon host. It was perfectly executed.”

One of the ways the ceremony celebrated the cultures of both North Carolina and Japan was through the menu for the luncheon. The cuisine was an homage both to the State and Japan. Guests enjoyed a meal designed by Ashley Christensen, a chef based in Raleigh. The menu consisted of three courses: chilled sunburst tomato and cucumber soup with benne seed and young ginger; seared wagyu beef tenderloin and poached North Carolinian shrimp served with masutake shoyu-marinated field peas, heirloom cornmeal crumb and little gem lettuces; and Carolina Gold Rice Pudding Brûlée with tunnel strawberries and rhubarb.

Some attendees of the state lunch, including Robinson, dined inside the Executive Mansion, and twenty members from the Japanese delegation and the governor’s staff ate lunch outside, underneath an outdoor tent, where they enjoyed Sam Jones BBQ. During the meal, Unspoken Tradition, a North Carolina-based bluegrass band, played outside.

Guests heard from Gov. Cooper, who provided remarks translated into Japanese, and from Prime Minister Kishida, who delivered a speech translated into English. Ambassador Emanuel also spoke at the luncheon.

The event was one of the highlights of the Prime Minister’s stay in North Carolina. The visit was the result of several months of planning, which Robinson coordinated. To prepare, Robinson reviewed extensive details regarding travel, accommodations, protocol, food and more.

While organizing a visit of this magnitude, Robinson encountered some questions that were not only unique to him, but to the State. His research involved many phone calls and conversations.

“We knew that the visit involved the largest airplane to ever land at RDU Airport,” says Robinson. “We didn’t know until about a month before the visit that the Japanese government needed to also land a spare plane – of the same size – that flies in after the prime minister’s plane lands.

“With the construction at RDU, I was out on the tarmac with the folks from RDU who were fantastic to work with. But logistically, we were asking, ‘Where do we park those big planes for three days?’”

Robinson and the team at RDU were able to find a solution, and for that he is grateful. Another question was where a 200-member delegation should stay for the weekend. That number included 50 members of the press corps who flew in with the Prime Minister.

“With heightened security, there were 200 hotel rooms that we had to eventually secure. There’s only one five-star hotel in the Triangle, so the Umstead was, I think, an obvious choice of one venue. But we had to compete with brides, office retreats and conferences. A 20+ vehicle motorcade needed to be swept by the Secret Service and then loaded in mere minutes every day. Roads had to be closed. Law enforcement escorts had to be arranged. The logistical planning was at times overwhelming.”

In the end, his efforts came to fruition: the visit was a resounding success.

What were some stops during Prime Minister Kishida’s and Mrs. Kishida’s tour of North Carolina?

In the morning, Mrs. Kishida and First Lady Kristin Cooper spent time at the Sarah P. Duke Gardens, where they had a traditional Japanese tea. They also visited the Museum of Natural Sciences to see a Japanese friendship doll, a gift to North Carolina from the people of Japan in the 1920s.

The Prime Minister traveled to two facilities owned by Japanese corporations and was accompanied by Gov. Cooper and Japanese dignitaries. One stop was the Toyota battery plant in Liberty, an electric and hybrid battery plant, Toyota’s first and sole facility of this kind. The second stop was HondaJet in Greensboro, where Honda Aircraft Company’s headquarters are located.

Prime Minister and Mrs. Kishida’s visit reflected on the long-standing partnership between North Carolina and Japan. Before the Prime Minister’s visit, Gov. Cooper proclaimed April 12, 2024, “North Carolina and Japan Friendship Day.” In the proclamation, the governor notes the significance of Japanese business to North Carolina. The proclamation says that over the last ten years, “Japanese economic development projects were the largest source of foreign investment in North Carolina.”

Traveling in the Prime Minister’s departing motorcade on the way to RDU airport, Robinson also got a taste of what it feels like to have a highway all to yourself, closed to all other traffic.

“I could get used to that,” he says, not surprisingly.



Ambassador Sugiyama and Robinson photographed in a HondaJet. The Ambassador and Robinson flew in a HondaJet to visit the Honda Aircraft Company's headquarters in Greensboro in 2019.

Two hundred and twenty-five Japanese-owned companies are located in North Carolina, and more than 30,000 North Carolinians are employed with a Japanese-owned company.

Robinson says that the 30,000 number of employees does not include several large jobs announcements in the past 12 months.

"We're going to add several thousand more in the next year to that number," he says. Here, he speaks not only of Toyota's anticipated hires but also of another company set to open a unit in Holly Springs in 2025, Fujifilm Diosynth Biotechnologies. The corporation has built a biopharmaceutical CDMO center they say will be operational next year.

Toyota and Fujifilm are not the only Japanese companies to have selected North Carolina as the location for key centers. Last month, Gov. Cooper's press office announced that Nipro Medical Corporation, an international leader in health care, will build its first North American manufacturing center in Pitt County. The governor's office shared that Nipro has invested more than 397.8 million dollars into the new development and will create a U.S. headquarters in Greenville. As this article was being written, candy company Morinaga ("hi-chew" candy) announced that it needs a second North Carolina manufacturing facility to keep up with demand.

At the same time, back in Japan, people every day enjoy many of the products that North Carolina grows and manufactures. The investment is record-breaking, but the trade is also extremely significant.

Developing partnerships and fostering relationships across international borders is meaningful to Robinson, and seems to come naturally.

How did Robinson become interested in building international business relationships?

It all started in Japan. The country holds a special place in his heart for a significant reason: it was the first home he remembers.

Robinson's father was transferred to Tokyo to run Deloitte Asia in the 1970s, when Robinson was 8. From his childhood through part of high school, Robinson lived in Tokyo. Following high school, while at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, he studied for one year as an exchange student at Sophia University in Tokyo.

After graduating from undergrad with a degree in foreign service, Robinson went to law school at George Washington University National Law Center, also in Washington, D.C., where he earned his J.D. He is somewhat fluent in Japanese and always eager to practice.

"I've been back and forth to Japan quite a bit since moving to North Carolina in 1990, and over the course of three decades as an attorney in Raleigh, I've helped – among other tasks – to start the Nippon Club, and the Japan-America Society of North Carolina. I've cooked a lot of Japanese noodles," he says. "Noodle diplomacy is an important goodwill tool."

International law has been significant to his career, beginning with his first job as an attorney with Graham & James, which was a large, global firm. Because the firm had many Asian connections, they were looking for someone who was familiar with both Japanese language and culture to join their office in North Carolina. In 1990, Robinson joined the firm, and other than a bit of back-and-forth to Charleston, S.C., has now resided in Raleigh for more than 30 years. He has worked both for firms and in private practice. He is currently a shareholder with Maynard Nexsen PC.

Since becoming the Honorary Consul for the state, he has seen tremendous interest in North Carolina and an expansion of Japanese businesses across North Carolina.

"When I started in this role in 2015, I used to start my speeches with 'This morning, 12,000 North Carolinians got up to go work for a Japanese-owned company.' People would nod in appreciation. Then, it became, 'This morning, 30,000 North Carolinians went to go work for a Japanese-owned corporation.'

"So a lot has changed. And it's exciting to be a part of it."



Robinson in Cyprus in 2023 as the North American committee representative at the Federation of International Consuls Annual Meeting.

As he thinks about the history of international business relationships between North Carolina and Japan, Robinson looks back on the people-to-people connections that make it all possible.

“What put North Carolina on the map for Japan 30 years ago was when the NCSU Japan Center translated the DMV handbook into Japanese so that the spouses of the technical VP’s who were coming to NC with these big investments could get a driver’s license and go buy groceries,” says Robinson. “Sure, companies invest the dollars – or yen – but it’s always fundamentally about the people.”

Translating the DMV handbook was important because once they received a driver’s license, individuals could go where they needed as they lived and worked in the state. To be able to drive provides a sense of freedom, and makes you feel more like you are at home. And, driving provides opportunities to explore.

Robinson’s experience as a diplomat and his background and volunteer work have lent him a unique perspective to the practice of law. An NCBA member since 2012, Robinson is currently a member of the International Practice Section and the Future of Law Committee.

Over the years, service is a value that has defined his career, as evidenced by his leadership roles in the NCBA and his community. Robinson was a member of the NCBA Board of Governors during the COVID pandemic and has twice chaired the International

Practice Section. He has also chaired the NCBA Future of Law Committee.

Beyond his work with the NCBA, he has taught legal courses at Campbell Law School and served as a trustee at Wake Tech Community College. He was honored as an outstanding volunteer with the Red Cross, where he was a Disaster Team member. He previously chaired the Wake County Board of Elections. He serves on the Board of Advisors for the NC Japan Center. He has chaired boards ranging from access to justice to rural health care initiatives.

“I appreciate that all the firms I’ve worked with, three big firms and then my own practice at one point in time, have all accommodated (and encouraged) the fact that at any given point in time, I probably serve on eight boards and probably chair a couple of them. The honorary consul gig is just one of those,” says Robinson.

“What’s rewarding to me? I think practicing law for sure is rewarding, but being on the other side of the table offers a valuable perspective, whether it’s in a business role or managing a nonprofit.”



Robinson photographed in Tokyo in 2018 while promoting the Summer Olympics, before COVID rescheduled the Games.

When asked why his international work in particular has been meaningful to him, he speaks about the NCBA attorney exchange programs he has participated in, both in Japan and elsewhere. Through attorney exchange programs, he has gained insight applicable to his practice and witnessed how others in the state and overseas have learned from these experiences.

“It has been especially rewarding to the participants and honestly to North Carolina’s understanding of how not just business lawyers, not just foreign direct investment scenarios, but literally how other countries view the judicial process.

“We’ve learned about countries that have constitutional courts. We’ve learned about countries that have different strata of lawyers or what’s a paralegal, what’s a law clerk. It’s been eye-opening, and that’s been personally rewarding for me.”

The NCBA collaboration with the bar association in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, is one of the experiences Robinson refers to. He assisted in facilitating connections with the association and traveled there with other NCBA leaders and members.

Another international trip Robinson was involved in was a visit to Japan’s Daini Bar Association in 2017. Robinson, along with other members of the International Practice Section, traveled to Tokyo, where they met with members of the bar association there.

This meeting led to future conversations.

“I’ll tell you, the Japanese trip was great not because I planned the visit, but because the Japanese bar sent a delegation to visit us the next year. We had a couple of lawyers from Japan attend the North Carolina Bar Association Annual Meeting in Wilmington that year. And, in a truly memorable moment, we had the Japanese delegation and the Haitian delegation in the same conference room with the current and two former chairs of the NCBA, and at one point the Japanese and Haitian lawyers started making their own plans together – it was amazing to be there for something ‘we birthed,’” he says.

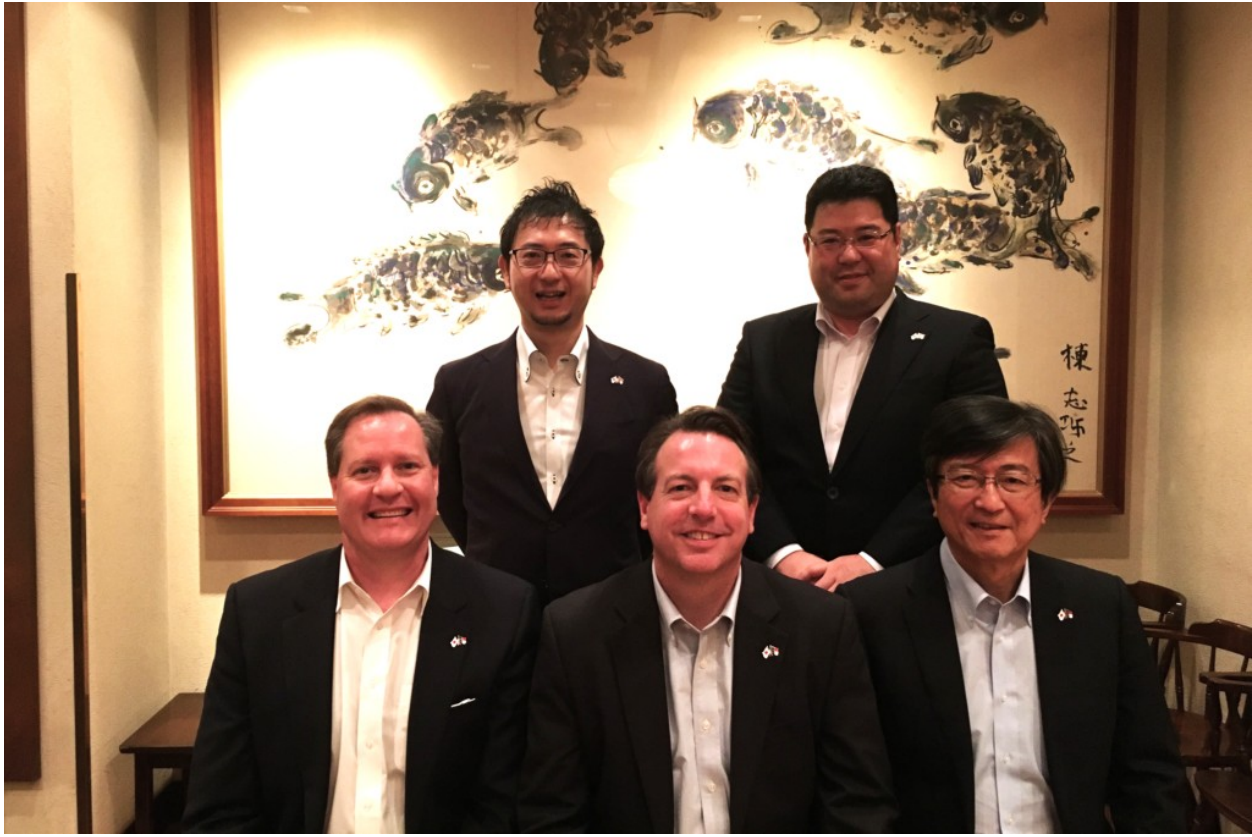
In the fall of 2023, Robinson traveled a second time to extend a Memorandum of Understanding between the NCBA and the Daini Bar Association in Japan.

Traveling to other countries and building relationships there is one of the most important parts of an international law practice.

“We send lawyers to law schools as part of the International Law Practice Section, and we talk about what it’s like to be an international lawyer. The question always comes up, well, how do I do that? We tell them they should get a subscription to *The Economist*. They should learn geography. They should take a couple of classes in international trade, or immigration law, or whatever is of interest in law school.

“But the advice almost always boils down to, ‘Get on an airplane.’” Robinson has been to

60 countries, and counting.



Robinson dines with members of the Daini Bar Association in Tokyo in 2018 to celebrate their decision to renew the MOU between our bar associations.

As consul, Robinson is building on a history of international connections, and he looks ahead to creating more opportunities for strengthening ties between North Carolina and Japan. He also chairs the North Carolina Consular Corps, comprised of the 24 heads of diplomatic missions in the State, and sees bridges being built around the world.

What does he hope to see more of in the future?

“I’d love to see another attorney exchange program announcement,” he says. “Because someday, most North Carolina lawyers in their practice will have a cross-border question or experience, and being part of an exchange program can be transformational. I’m just blessed that I happen to come across cross-border issues all day, every day.

“We’re inextricably in the global economy, or at least our clients are. I’d love for our bar to participate in these programs regularly because it really is eye-opening for the participants.”

Speaking about fortifying relationships with Japanese law students, Robinson recalls a speech he gave at an attorney exchange program, in which he discussed the heart of his role.

Central to building international relationships is extending warmth and kindness to others, something he has personally experienced in his travels and in his life.

“I basically said all of us American lawyers who are doing international law, probably somewhere in our past – in my case, in my childhood – I’ve met wonderfully welcoming people in foreign countries. And that made me want to do what I do – welcome others to North Carolina. And I said, we need to serve in that role for students who are coming from overseas to study law here.

“That resonated. I think we do a good job of that. But I would love for our profession to do an even better job of retaining these foreign students; the same way we do with foreign businesses,” says Robinson.

Reflecting on his role as consul, Robinson is proud of what he and others have accomplished together over the past nine years, yet he does not consider his work to be done.

As he looks toward their future endeavors, he plans on reaching new heights by working collaboratively.

“There will always be bridges to be built, and that’s ultimately what diplomats do. The Consul General visited again in July. We’ve got a number of visits with some of the new Japanese investments here. We’ve got a large delegation heading over to Japan early next year, and we’re going to help them plan to make that as productive as possible,” hesays.

“We make things, we grow things, we research and develop things that the rest of the world wants. We are a welcoming place. And, we’re an incredibly attractive place to invest and grow a business. I see no lull in all of that action anytime soon.”

Jessica Junqueira is communications manager for the North Carolina Bar Association.
