

Gateway symbolizes school's ties to Japan



Deborah D'Amico, principal of Arlington's Hardy School, addresses the crowd at its new Japanese gate's dedication. (Tom Musco)

By [Sandra A. Miller](#)

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As students, parents, and teachers gathered on the front lawn of the Hardy Elementary School in Arlington, the youngest children played peek-a-boo, darting between rows of colorful handmade koinobori, carp-shaped windsocks traditionally flown from houses on Children's Day in Japan.

Thirteen hours ahead, on the other side of the world, the sun was beginning to rise on the May 5 holiday, which celebrates the happiness of boys and girls.

Hardy School principal Deborah D'Amico stepped in front of the main attraction, a graceful 9-foot-high, timber-framed, cedar gate that now connects the school garden with an outdoor classroom.

"Today we gather to dedicate our beautiful Japanese gate," D'Amico cheerfully announced to the crowd attending the ceremony.

But then, her voice dropped as she recalled another day more than a year earlier.

“We all remember the terrible hours and days after the earthquake and tsunami,” she said, “when Hardy families desperately tried to contact family and friends in Japan.” Both days — one celebratory, the other tragic — were being marked with the help of D’Amico’s husband, Tom Musco, a soft-spoken, master timber framer from Royalston who has a passion for Japanese culture.

A part-time hazard mitigation specialist with the Federal Emergency Management Agency, Musco, 65, offered to build a wooden Japanese gate for the schoolyard, a project that would recognize the international community at Hardy, which includes approximately 15 Japanese families. With help from some mothers, he had completed work on an appropriate design when the tsunami struck the northern coast of Japan on March 11, 2011.

“I felt the horror that all of us felt as we watched footage of the tsunami’s destruction,” said D’Amico. “But I also felt a real connection to it all. These people are as real as the families I see every day.”

Last July, Musco spent 250 hours and \$2,000 of his own money to build the gate from hard-to-find cedar wood that he obtained from a forest in northern Maine. He shaped the arch using wood from a cherry tree on his own property, and finished it using the Japanese hand tools that he favors.

“I like the way they feel,” Musco said.

On a Saturday last September, about 30 families came together to raise the gate, a strong, artistic structure created without nails or metal, just wooden pegs and mortise and tenon joinery — an ancient and highly sturdy form of construction in which beams are cut to fit into posts.

“After we put it up,” Musco said, “Deb and I talked about dedicating it to the strength and courage of the Japanese people.”

Musco discovered timber framing in the 1970s when it was beginning to experience a revival based on 15th-century traditions. He has since completed nearly 200 timber-frame projects, including a barn for children’s book author Jan Brett.

“It’s such a stroke of luck that our principal’s husband has this skill and built us this simple but majestic gate,” said Heather Smith, a vice president of the Hardy PTO who organized the ceremony, which included a song presented by second-graders and words of dedication in English and Japanese.

“We’re also lucky to have such a diverse and caring community at our school,” Smith said.

Musco recently embellished the structure with a carving of the Japanese kanji symbol kizuna, which means “bonds between people.”

“The gate is very beautiful,” said Riyota Kikuchi, the father of four Hardy School children and the person chosen to make the dedication in Japanese. “And it will be here for a long time.”

