

Fudeko receives Japan's Order of the Rising Sun

By *LOUISE EDDY*

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OVERWHELMED: Bathurst woman Fudeko Reekie has been awarded one of Japan's greatest honours, the Order of the Rising Sun. Photo: PHILL MURRAY
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One of Bathurst's most gracious and humble residents Fudeko Reekie has been awarded the prestigious Order of the Rising Sun.

The Japanese equivalent of the Order of Australia is rarely awarded to people who live outside Japan.

Mrs Reekie was given the honour for her distinguished achievements in international relations and the promotion of Japanese culture.

She said she is overwhelmed and filled with gratitude to receive the honour.

The Order of the Rising Sun was established in 1875 by Emperor Meiji of Japan, and is awarded to those who have made distinguished achievements in international relations, promotion of Japanese culture, advancements in their field, development in social/occupational welfare or preservation of the environment.

Foreigners have only been eligible for the honour since 1981, and women since 2003.

Mrs Reekie has been an Australian citizen for the past 40 years, so despite considering herself to be Japanese, she is deemed a foreigner in the country of her birth.

She is leaving for Japan on May 9 and will be presented with the prestigious award by the Japanese Foreign Minister, before travelling to the Imperial Palace to meet the Emperor.

While she has seen the bridge leading to the palace, the building itself is completely screened from view, so she has never seen it. Soon she will be stepping inside its doors.

“This still feels like a dream,” she said. “I feel like it is happening to someone else. It is a big honour. My brothers and sisters are so excited.”

Mrs Reekie was born in Saku City, Nagano Prefecture, in May 1936.

She excelled academically, with particular interest in art, English, Japanese calligraphy and sport.

Later at Tokyo Gakugei University, she studied English literature, English language education and educational psychology, before taking up a scholarship at the University of Saskatchewan in Canada.

“I was born in a little town surrounded by mountains,” Mrs Reekie said. “From the time I was very small, I was always curious about what was beyond those mountains.”

In Canada she studied English literature, teaching English as a second language and fine arts.

During her time at the university, she was approached by the Saskatchewan Education Department with a request to work in the local public schools teaching Japanese history, customs, songs, dances, origami, ikebana and kimono.

It was while she was in Canada that she met her future husband.

She returned to Japan in 1961 to gain a greater insight into Japanese culture by studying ikebana, the tea ceremony and traditional dancing.

“I had come to realise how ignorant I was about Japanese culture and tradition,” she said.

In 1962 she went to work for the foreign affairs department of the prestigious Asahi Newspaper as a translator for the company president and foreign dignitaries.

In this role she met many foreign dignitaries, including Robert Kennedy and his wife Ethel.

“I came to realise the importance of understanding nations other than your own because it is the key to world peace,” Mrs Reekie said.

She moved to Australia in 1963 with her husband and eldest child. In 1967 the family moved to Papua New Guinea.

She took a job with Ansett Airlines as a tour advisor to Japanese people.

On occasion Mrs Reekie went with a priest to find where Japanese had been buried during the war.

She even helped them dig up the bones to take home to Japan.

Following Papua New Guinea's independence in 1975, the family moved to Bathurst.

Mrs Reekie taught Japanese at All Saints' College for the next 35 years, delighted to finally have the opportunity to start building bridges between Australia and Japan.

She wrote a number of Japanese text books for Australian students, and in 2010 received a great honour when the Japanese Language Centre at All Saints' was renamed the Fudeko Reekie Language Centre.

She now volunteers as a teacher of Japanese Culture at the University of the Third Age.

Mrs Reekie is also a principal advisor and administrator for language and cultural exchange programs between the people of Bathurst and Japan.

In 1990 she was involved in forming our sister city relationship with Ohkuma.

After the Fukushima nuclear disaster of March 2011, the people of Bathurst raised considerable money for their sister city.

Mrs Reekie has continued to liaise between Ohkuma and Bathurst, supplying much needed information on the welfare of those affected by the tragedy.

"It is an amazing life that I have had," Mrs Reekie said.

"Because I came to Australia I had a chance to do things that not many Japanese have.

"I feel I am representing Japan now in a way I could not have done if I had remained there."