

Providing Right Message and Information

for General Population

Interview

Shoo YAMAMOTO
Radio DJ

“Stories from Remarkable People”

“Schools and homes are in states of emergency, but everyone has love and everyone has passion. Miracles can happen if we bring our hearts together, and not just go through the motions.”

(Interviewed by Tatsuya Kai, Assistant Director, Public Relations Office, Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare)



Returning from New York to Face Reverse Culture Shock

You did a wonderful job producing RED RIBBON LIVE 2006. What was your motive for doing an AIDS prevention awareness event?



Yamamoto: I used to live in New York City for three years. It's now been more than 10 years since I returned to Japan in 1993. In my radio and TV shows, and in my other live talk events, I've always tried to raise awareness about AIDS. When I was living in New York City, there were many people with AIDS around me, including a dance instructor who was HIV positive. After the lessons, he would say "Goodbye!" and give his students kisses. I asked my dance friends, "Can HIV be transmitted through kisses?" and they told me that that you couldn't get infected through light kisses. So in day to day life, I learned things about AIDS, and AIDS felt like something that wasn't far away from me. Of course in 1990 Magic Johnson, the NBA star suddenly retired because he'd been infected with HIV. AIDS wasn't just a problem for homosexuals. Magic Johnson wasn't gay, so when he retired, it showed even more that AIDS was something that could be close to me. After that, a lot of musicians started singing to raise awareness, and holding awareness events, which really made a lot of people see the problem. The media and MTV did a lot to help this along.

One day after I came back to Japan, I was in a taxi and all of a sudden the taxi driver said to me, "Sir, I have family in Japan, but I also have another family outside of Japan. I went to a wedding just a little while ago. If I send them 50,000 yen each month, the entire family can get by. At my company, we're always going on sex tours." I heard this and thought that in 10 years, Japan was going to run into major problems. It was a reverse culture shock, and I thought "Uh oh." After that, I wanted to speak about AIDS on the radio, but they asked me not to. They said it was a depressing subject, and that it wouldn't get ratings. Basically, they were saying that the sponsors wouldn't like it. I couldn't believe how little awareness people had. I decided that I had to do what I could, and that has been my motivation.

Bringing Together the Hearts of Citizens and People in Government

The Japanese Foundation for AIDS Prevention and the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare were joint sponsors of the live event. What are your thoughts about this partnership?

Yamamoto: What I want to say most is that whether it is the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare or the Japanese Foundation for AIDS Prevention, in the end everything depends on individuals that have love and passion. What I'm trying to say is that, for instance, when I was first approached by the ministry and the foundation, I showed my anger against them, but it was out of a feeling of solidarity and love. I told them, "You've committed a crime. Nobody knows about AIDS, and it's spreading in teenagers. If you had done your jobs as professionals, there'd be no need for me to do anything." They took my words to heart and said, "That's why we want to work with you." It was clear that they were passionate, too. In order to make the event a success, I needed to see the determination and the humanity that I knew they were supposed to have. I needed to see these things in them because a message won't reach anyone unless the people trying to send the message are determined and serious. If we didn't have this passion, nobody would want to work with us anyway. The people at the ministry might work day after day until late at night, but most people don't see this. Not only that, silly problems at the ministry get all the attention. I feel sorry for the people who are working hard. These public employees always have to deal with unreasonable pressures from their superiors, or society, or with the inertia of how things have always been done. Just like schoolteachers, it's no wonder these people go insane! What exactly are they fighting with? That's why, when I decided to produce this event, I needed people to be passionate and human, even though it would be hard. It needed to be such a success that, when it was all done, we'd be crying tears of joy. Everyone would see that we were all people and that we had to join together and do everything we could possibly do. We needed to do more than just put on appearances, because that doesn't mean anything. You could call it pride or self-respect. Aren't these people meant to serve the country? That's why I gave love to every member of the project, even though they might not have wanted it (laughter).

And what happened was that, even a month before the event was going to happen, people would come to me and ask, "When the event is finished, is it ok to cry?" I thought to myself, how long has this person needed to feel this kind of passion? When things actually ended, they did cry. [laughs] They're really passionate people.

When you put these people into organizations, their pure and passionate hearts start to forget how to express themselves. But that doesn't really matter. What's important is that they don't give up, and that their hearts move in a better direction, even if it's only by a millimeter. I think that's a really admirable thing. That's why now more than ever, it's important for people and government to come together with passion and work with each other to do what they can. I know that everyone at the ministry or the foundation is a loving and passionate human being.

Many artists and athletes participated in the event. Wasn't it difficult to match up all their schedules and bring them together?

Yamamoto: It was very, very hard. People in the industry say that it was a miracle, and they aren't exaggerating. It's like what I was saying before: the people organizing the event, including the people at my talent agency and the staff at my live talk shows, were able to communicate their humanity, passion, and determination to our supporters. It's like little league baseball, when everybody, even your team members sitting on the bench, gets into the game. This was all possible because of everyone's support, and because of their passion. There was a lot of love from the artists' production companies and record companies. It wasn't me who did it. It was everyone's love, from the production companies to the managers to the record companies. At some agencies, people would tell me that things would never get approved if they went to their bosses, so they put their own positions on the line to participate.

The Roots of Activism in ‘Meddling’ Nagaya Tenement Culture

Was your work as “Lemon-san” in PTA the origin of your sensitivity for issues that are outside a DJ’s normal job?

Yamamoto: It’s not. My roots haven’t really changed from since before I was Lemon-san. They’re absolutely the same! They are in my childhood in a Nagaya tenement house. In these tenements, the culture is very nosy and meddling. I was a latchkey child, and you could say that I was raised through the meddling of the adults around me. When I was a kid playing little league baseball, I would wash my uniform in a tub outside. People would come and show me the proper way to wash my uniform, and even my shoelaces. I was only in elementary school and didn’t know how, so I’d sit outside my front door and stretch out each shoelace like a noodle on the concrete. I’d put some soap on a scrub brush and try to wash each one, but they’d always crumple up as I was doing it. One day, a housewife who lived nearby was passing me on her way home from shopping. She put down her shopping bags and said, “What are you doing? Let me try!” She had to go home to prepare dinner, but put her hands in the cold water, taking both of the laces and said, “Give me the soap!” She took the laces together and put them in the water and kneaded them in her hands. She gave them a quick rinse in the water and they were clean and white in an instant. It was like magic to me.

When my mother was late coming home, and I was playing with one of my friends, his mom would call him back for dinner. They knew I’d be alone, so they’d invite me too, saying, “Let’s eat together. We’re having curry rice.” I ended up having curry at a lot of different houses.

Needless meddling can be a real pain, but we know that the meddling we need is really a tremendous kind of love. The kids meddled with by adults realize this, and are grateful for it. They naturally become meddling adults. Listening to someone’s problems, or asking a kid who looks down “What’s wrong?” are both a kind of meddling. “You don’t look so good lately. Is everything ok?” “If there’s something wrong, let’s go talk about it over some tea.” There’s a huge difference for the person who needs help if there’s someone who will say these things to them, even if it’s just talking. So my roots are all in the Nagaya culture. Everything, even the RED RIBBON LIVE is meddling. Everything I’m doing right now is meddling.

In a Position to Hear Real Voices from Society

Yamamoto: A radio DJ is a meddling sort of job isn’t it? The listener is society. Listeners come from all generations and all occupations. They’re listening to my show in all kind of places. They are society. Especially to a straight talking DJ like me, listeners talk about what society is really thinking. There’s anonymity, so if, for example, there’s a problem with schools, then teachers tell me what they really think. Kids tell me what they really think, even things they can’t tell their own mothers. They also talk about things related to sex. This has been the same for ages, and it’s especially true for late-night radio. I hear about people’s worries and all kinds of irrational and frustrating things. There are junior high school kids that say, “I’m dating my teacher.” There are kids that are being bullied, and of course, I hear from kids who have done bullying.

To put it simply, being a DJ is kind of like putting up a loudspeaker in the middle of a tiny village, and announcing things like “Hello everybody. We’re all getting together tonight at five at the town hall for something” or “A typhoon is coming so be careful” or “Mr. Whoever is facing some problems. Can anyone help him?” A DJ is just a meddling blabbermouth who is calling out to everyone. People like me are like the putty around a window. We’re meddlers who connect entertainers, cultural figures, or athletes with the people.

In the past, there were a lot of meddlers and people with a strong sense of justice. Today, there are people in their 70s or 80s who say “It’s our fault that the world has become like this. When we lost the war, we didn’t know what we had to teach our children.”



You can't be an adult who really cares for your kids if you are only doing things for yourselves and for your own families

Is that taking responsibility for one's actions?

Yamamoto: I think in reality, the people accept Japan's grade-focused education, and say "Ok!" when being told to go and get good grades are the most honest, the nicest, and the most innocent. But it's the country's fault if these people are steered in the wrong direction. Whose fault is it when so many people are dying and so many people are in pain? It's the fault of the people who are running the country. But then we see that we as citizens are the ones who chose them. You're right; it means that everyone is responsible. That's why I hold no grudge against anyone who came before me.

During the 60th anniversary year of the end of the war, I went to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum and Etajima for the first time since elementary school. What used to be one of Japan's three major military academies, the Imperial Japanese Naval Academy was on Etajima. Only the most elite students went there. Today, the Maritime Self-Defense Force runs it as a museum open to the public. In the very last room, the final letters written by members of the Kamikaze Attack force are kept in glass cases. When I read those letters, I nearly fell to my knees. They were stories of love. It was overwhelming. They're the words of people about to face death, and so they are very pure. The letters ask for peace, and ask for the people they are leaving behind to have happy lives. When I found these, I realized that I had been only thinking about my own life. I thought, "I can't just live and die. It can't be that just my generation is going to profit from the world that the people who come before us suffered to build. That's an awful way to live." We have to put our own lives on the line for the next generation. If we think of them as our own children, then we should all be able to do something. It's a question of whether living only for yourself and your own family is really in the best interests of your children. We have to realize that this isn't true, but it's hard because we've been educated not to see this. I feel sad, because nobody is at fault.

When truly pure hearts come together, miracles are possible

Yamamoto: I thought, "I have to teach them about AIDS. I have to teach the Japanese people, and all of my friends." That's why I was on the radio saying, "Hey everyone. Do you know about it?" People tried to stop me, but I didn't give up and kept saying it. But they stopped me again, and I felt it was unreasonable. That's where my live talk shows started. My producer said snidely that the radio waves are public property, and if I wanted to talk about personal things then why didn't I say them in front of a paying audience? That's where things started.

And now, the event has been going on for nine years. The staff members are all volunteers. I didn't gather them myself. They just came together naturally. People just started calling other people. It's still going on, even though there are all kinds of tough things that happen and even though we sometimes go to meetings without having been able to sleep.

What I've realized through all this is that all people, everyone on the staff including me, are lonely and pure-hearted. We have meetings and we say things like "How are you doing lately?" The atmosphere is clear; we're surrounded by friends in a setting where one person's gain doesn't mean someone else loses out.

When we were doing RED RIBBON LIVE, I said to the people from the ministry, "We won't let you just get the budget and leave the rest to us. You're being paid to help us aren't you? Nobody else I ask to work on this is going to get paid." We need people to bring passion to work or the event won't be a success. I don't differentiate people based on their jobs. I'm angry about crimes; the crimes of the ministry and the crimes of the government. I don't hate any one person.

Nobody realizes it, but RED RIBBON LIVE 2006 was a miracle. I'm not boasting about it. What I'm trying to tell people is that when truly pure hearts come together, miracles are possible. If we're



really determined, and if we believe with all our hearts that we need to save this country from AIDS and overcome our prejudice, then we'll always succeed, and we'll make miracles. It's the hearts of each individual person. I just mean that we haven't learned yet that we can feel alive if we do work with our hearts in the right place.

I'm not doing this work because I am Lemon-san or anything like that. I'm just a person who grew up in a Nagaya tenement house, and who found a mike in front of himself when he was saying, "Excuse me, we have a problem." and getting called a DJ. I'm just someone who wore a lemon on his head and who was in a book and suddenly became Lemon-san. I'm really just an ordinary, meddling boy. That's what I really am. If I weren't, then all these artists wouldn't come together. All these artists and famous people come together because I treat them as people. It doesn't matter to me whether you're famous or you're a good singer or you've sold a lot of CDs. I'll say that amazing things are amazing, and this heart to heart relationship makes them understand me just with one phone call. Everyone is a person, just like everyone else. Everyone has a heart and everyone has feelings. We're just opening them to each other.

Everyone must help schools

You've been directly involved with schools through your PTA work. You came up with Lemon-san, or rather the idea to wear something, and interact directly with kids. As a result of all this, is there anything that you want to tell to parents and to adults?

Yamamoto: If I had to put it in one sentence, I'd want to scream, "There's a fire!" I didn't know it, but there's a fire, and unless we stop it, it's going to burn down all the schools. "There's a fire!" really means that we all need to help the schools. I also want to say that the old stereotype that the father goes to work and the mother protects the home has already died out. If you protect only your own home, and work hard to benefit just yourself, you'll become a person who's not protecting anything at all.

Parents love their children, and it's a tragedy when those parents don't realize that the school their kids go to is burning. What I'm thinking is that we all need to go and help fight the fire.

I'm invited to give talks at a lot of places, but all of them, especially the RED RIBBON LIVE, are emergency alerts. That's what they are to me. I've sent out AIDS emergency alerts, but they're also warnings about the education emergency in this country. We're in a time of war. I mean that there's a civil war happening right now. It's a war in the homes. Right now, in Japan's homes, nobody understands what the father is saying; nobody understands what the mother is saying; and we have fights between parents. Nobody understands what the kids are saying and brother and sisters fight with each other. There are battles going on in homes.

We hear about it in the news when these battles become a big war. We might think that we have peace but these things are happening right now in Japan, and things are looking grim. I'm not trying to scare people. If you look at things historically, this is the point we've reached. Post-war education in Japan – relentless, grade-focused education – has collapsed. There's a certain logic and appeal to graduating from a good university, finding a nice job, living a stable life, and finding satisfaction. But we need to see that this isn't everything, and we can't take for granted that people will keep learning the things that they used to learn naturally at home. There are five things that I think we need to teach properly. The first is the meaning of love. The second is the meaning of pride. The third is the meaning of happiness. The fourth is the meaning of life. And the last one is the meaning of money. Until now, school has taught students how to get good grades, but we've come to a time when education for the heart needs to be commonplace.

The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare has also started to focus more on 'the community'. The theme of white papers this year and the year before was 'the community'. For residents, these social links are important aren't they?

Yamamoto: I think we need to return to the idea that in human society, a community raises its children, and a community supports its families. In the past, in the Edo period, there was Nagaya culture. There were a lot of towns full of 'meddlers' in Japan, but somewhere along the way, people stopped meddling and the communities broke apart. It's odd that we even need to talk about schools, parents, and the community coming together as one. We need to say that this is how it should really be.

Pride is about feeling good about yourself, and having self-respect

Have we forgotten today, the things that used to be obvious? The parents of the kids today went to school when grade-focused education was at its peak. Are we seeing the effects of this now?

Yamamoto: Yes. It's the same as the AIDS problem. Things have gotten bad, but nobody recognizes the problem because nobody was made to recognize it. In my live talk shows, I've always said that the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare was at fault, because it was their responsibility, but it's really the fault of the ministers and prime ministers who ran the ministry. But Japan's education system and our society produced politicians who think in a certain way. In the end, it's the responsibility of us all.

All the same, the root cause of the drug problem is the society that drives kids to feel stress that makes them need the drugs. You could say that there are young people who are only able to survive because of drugs. Without them, they might be consumed by sadness and go insane. They might want to die, but instead they find something to help them escape from reality. It's the same whether it's thinner or toluene or something else. By using drugs, they forget their pain for just a moment. This is how they are able to keep living.

I'm not advocating drug-use, but the real problem is the stress that makes people turn to drugs. The real problem is that society doesn't talk about this stress, and doesn't understand these calls for help.

It comes back to the five things I mentioned before. If I had to narrow them down even further, I'd say that 'Pride' is probably the most important. Looking back to my childhood, the pride that men around me talked about was really just a pretense. These men would say, "I was shamed in front of others, My pride has been damaged." But I think about it as an adult and I see that it was pretense and appearance. Pride isn't something that can be injured by someone else. I think of pride as "thinking highly of yourself." It's the ability to think of yourself as cool. It's about self-respect. If you litter when nobody else is looking, your pride and self-respect are injured in that moment.

Children aren't learning this pride, human dignity, or self-respect. That's why they bully, con, or bribe other people. They think that they only need to look out for themselves. That's really an awful way to live. If they were taught pride, then all of this could be stopped.



Every adult needs to protect the children with their lives

I read your book "Lemon-san no PTA Bakudan [Lemon-san's Explosive PTA Talk]." What do you think is the most important thing for schoolchildren right now?

Yamamoto: The most important thing for kids in school right now is love from adults. Kids don't know what love is. They've lost sight of love; what it means to love and be loved. That's why there are so many problems. Adults aren't teaching these things to kids. Kids will understand if adults teach them properly about love. Kids are so innocent. When I say things like this, someone will always tell me that if you put all the blame on adults, then you'll just spoil the kids. They'll say that the kids carry at least some responsibility. If there were kids who would be spoiled when adults took all the blame, then that would also be the responsibility of our education.

That's why whenever I hear that another child has hung himself, I feel sad. It's painful. When I was small, I was told that we were going to carry the world forward, and that we had to build the world. Every time I remember this, and see the kind of world that we've ended up in, I get frustrated. It makes me think about the wartime, and whether what they were doing was right or wrong, the people who put their lives on the line for their children. I'm not saying anything about the country, but about the individuals. On a personal level, I can feel their love. A war needs to be stopped, no matter where it is, even in the home. I believe that everyone has the right to be happy. That's why adults need to do all that they can to communicate our love.

Every adult in Japan needs to pour all their love into education and its problems. It's the same for AIDS. It doesn't matter whether you're an athlete, or a comedian, or a cultural figure. Everybody needs to do what he or she can to save the children and to save education. People have to think about education. It's an emergency. Our children are being targeted. They're hanging themselves. They're bullying each other. They can't relate to each other. It's the responsibility of all adults. It doesn't matter whether you're in the Ministry of Education, or any other ministry. We can't have even one child that kills their parents. The parents think that it's love to hit their children, and they can't think of anything else. Why do they need to die? Why do the children need to kill and be thrown in jail? These pointless fights, these pointless battles, they're no different than wars. The most important thing we can do for our children is to love them as though our lives depended on it. We need this right away.



Radio is a medium that touches the heart

In radio, you use a medium where you deal with the difficulties of communicating emotion using only your voice, and where you can do something because you don't see the faces of the audience. As a radio DJ, what feelings do you experience most strongly through radio?

Yamamoto: In radio, there is no image. There is nothing visual. That makes it a medium that communicates directly to the audience's hearts. That's why, unless I am really feeling something, that emotion won't be communicated to anyone who is listening.

You can't fake words. Radio is dangerous unless you speak straight from the heart. That's why I use radio: because we're in an emergency. In a natural disaster, the radio is the best way to get information. What I'm saying is that all of Japan is caught in a disaster. A major disaster. Everyone is in trouble, and that's why we need radio. It reaches people's hearts. Everyone is busy, and everyone is at work, but people have the radio on at work. And they hear, "Moms, you can't hit your kids" or "It's not about whether you hit them or not." "You can hit them but do they know you love them?" "Dads, your kids don't know why you're hitting them. It's dangerous. They might get back at you with a baseball bat."

That's why we brought all the radio stations together for this event. They told me that getting all 10 radio stations in the Tokyo area would be hard, but we got all of them, and they all cooperated with us. Everyone joined hands. The stations were all very excited.

I want to live my life by connecting with people's hearts

Can you tell us about your future plans, and where you see RED RIBBON LIVE moving forward?

Yamamoto: That's really up to the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare. The other artists and I all want to continue this.

People who have bought into the system of grade-focused education see me as strange, when I talk about this country's heart, or when I speak passionately, like I have. When I'm in a meeting and say, "That's wrong," the room goes silent, which seems very strange to me. But that's how Japan's education has made people. I also think there's nothing we can do, and I don't hate anyone for it.

Now, I see things that I can do to help, and so I'll put my heart into doing those things. In the end, I want to be able to look back and feel the satisfaction of having done a good job and connected with good friends. I'll have something to show my own children. I'll have been able to teach them something important, and given them keys to a happy life.

I think RED RIBBON LIVE has been one of those rare events where hearts have connected, and these hearts made everything possible.

I hope that events like these will continue to connect people.

Yamamoto: So do I. I believe that the government, the people, PTAs, communities and schools need to work together. Everyone has a heart: a heart full of determination, a pure heart, a passionate heart, an angelic heart. We need to use these to fight the demons within us and “Do what I can, to the greatest extent possible, and never give up!” We need to join with people who share our goals and work together for the next generation with pride and the love that shows through meddling.

It’s a wonderful feeling to live in a world where people watch out for each other, support each other, and love each other. I don’t want to be anywhere other than that kind of Nagaya-like world. I’ve been happy in it. That’s why I’ll never stop meddling.

Thank you for taking the time to speak to us today.

(December 20, 2006)

Shoo YAMAMOTO

Born 1964 in Kadoma, Osaka. Managed by Amuse. His nickname is “Lemon-san.” Yamamoto works primarily as a radio personality, and as an MC on television. He also writes columns for Mainichi Shogakusei Shimbun and books on pedagogy and teaching technique. Currently, he hosts Saturday Storm (broadcast on FM-FUJI), Shoo Power Request, and Shoo Power Camp (both broadcast on FM Osaka.) Yamamoto began lecturing at Yamanashi Eiwa College two years ago, and will begin lecturing at Osaka University this year. His book “Lemon-san no PTA Bakudan [Lemon-san’s Explosive PTA Talk],” published by Shogakukan, collects his columns and documentaries relating to his PTA activities. All royalties from the book are donated to charity.



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