



News from the History Team



Sue Lofgren (center) at an Oktoberfest with Mohamed, the Mayor of Timbuktu (right) and an ASU student interpreter (left).

Tempe's fifth sister city, added after Skopje and Regensburg in the 1970s, and Lower Hutt and Zhenjiang in the 1980s, is Timbuktu, in Mali. The relationship—referred to in French, Mali's second language, as *jumelage*—was launched in 1991. The first country coordinator was Sue Lofgren, who shared some of her reflections on the range of activities that Tempe Sister Cities undertook over the years, in an oral history interview in April 2021.

One key point of distinction in the Tempe-Timbuktu relationship is that no Tempe high school students have ever traveled to Timbuktu through TSC. As the country coordinator, Sue vetoed the suggestion whenever it was raised in board meetings. Her argument was one of health and safety. Timbuktu is 600 miles Northeast of Bamako, the country's capital city, on the edge of the Sahara desert. When the relationship began, there was no asphalt road to Timbuktu; hospital services were underfunded, and electricity, water and sewage systems were not fully operational.

So instead of trying to develop the kind of youth exchange that has driven most of Tempe's sister city relationships, Sue threw her energies into a range

of humanitarian initiatives. When recruited to the role by long-time TSC President Richard Neuheisel, Sue confessed to knowing next to nothing about Timbuktu. Her response—in her words—was to “hit the books.” She learned about Timbuktu's rich cultural heritage, as home to one the world's largest manuscript collections in the 14th century, and a leading center of Islamic scholarship, producing astronomers, philosophers and educators. She also learned about the city's role in the salt trade across Africa, and the influence of French colonial rule. And she also sought out Arizonans with expertise and experience to further inform her, and contribute to first steps.

The roll-call of people who got involved shows how effective this approach was. Among the Arizonans who helped Sue in assessing needs, delivering assistance, and building the relationship were Irma Turtle, who in her own right built a humanitarian organization to serve the nomadic Tuareg people. Irma traveled to Timbuktu on behalf of TSC in 1993, to ask the Mayor to identify priorities. In 1995, Chet Andrews (1930-2014), a retired SRP water engineer, traveled to Timbuktu to report on water needs and how to address them. And in 1997, Tempe High French teacher Maureen Buffington and Parasitology specialist Dr. Omar Amin traveled with Sue.

In our interview, she reflected on the fact that Tempe's delegation that year was made up of three naturalized U.S. citizens—Sue herself came to the U.S. from Germany as a child in the 1930s, Maureen was born in Canada, and Omar in Egypt. It's that kind of U.S. diversity, she suggests—as well as always listening to what locals and experts have to say about priorities—that helps organizations like TSC overcome falling into the trap of the “Ugly American,” and assuming they have the answers.

As she took the time to learn about Timbuktu and Mali, Sue also drew on her own long experience with the League of Women Voters, and with local and national advocacy movements to improve water quality, and address wastewater problems. Her initial volunteerism, she acknowledges, came from a sense of obligation to leave the world in a better state than she found it, for the next generation. She saw these same values animating Timbuktu's citizens, and also saw that women's leadership was critical.



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The enduring contributions that Tempe Sister Cities has made to Timbuktu reflect these priorities. Between the late 1990s and the early 2000s, Tempe Sister Cities raised \$70,000 for the drilling of eight water wells in Timbuktu—serving community needs for hygiene, as well as drinking and cooking needs. In 2000, President Richard Neuheisel led a delegation of 13 board members to Timbuktu, and was there for the official opening of one of the TSC pumps.

A smaller donation that made a difference in women's lives in particular was the purchase of a millet grinding machine. What Sue and her team heard from Timbuktu's leadership is how time-consuming and physically demanding it was to turn millet grains into flour by hand, using a mortar and pestle. This was work generally done by women, as they prepared food from millet flour. A robust, communally operated millet grinder cut the work of hours to minutes. A large crowd was present when TSC's gift of a millet grinding machine was presented in 1971.



Ali Ould Sidi and others applaud as TSC and Sister Cities International President Richard Neuheisel pumps drinking water from a well funded by Tempe Sister Cities, Timbuktu in 2000. Photograph from the collection of Sue Lofgren.



August 2001: Madame Maiga Adizetou receives Tempe Sister Cities gift of a millet grinder on behalf of the association she directs, Timbuktu. Photograph from the collection of Sue Lofgren.

Besides these material traces, Tempe's engagement with Timbuktu has helped to advance the city's human capital. As well as providing school supplies over many years TSC has enabled at least two talented changemakers gain new skills and credentials through advanced study in the United States, and then put their talents to work for shared goals.

Zalia Maiga Toure received her MA from ASU in 2005, and then her PhD from the University of Arizona in 2010, before returning to Mali to play a leadership role in advocating for girls' education. And since receiving his PhD in Education and Conflict Resolution in 2017, Talatou Abdoulaye has served as ombudsman at Utah Valley University, bringing cross-cultural experience and expertise.

In the acknowledgments to his PhD, Talatou thanks Aunt Sue Lofgren in Tempe. It's an affirmation of Sue's own reflection on what matters most in the Timbuktu-Tempe ties that she has helped create over more than two decades. She has led by opening her heart and her mind, creating new coalitions, listening closely to the dreams and aspirations of others, and reveling in their success when they achieve them.