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A FREE MONTHLY E-NEWSLETTER FOR FRIENDS OF JAPAN & TEACHERS OF JAPANESE



2012 JET MEMORIAL INVITATION PROGRAM REPORT PART 4: TOHOKU REGION

by Thomas Lin, Program Officer, JFLA

Previous Issue: Japan Bound!

In the morning, we walked down to the airline counter for our tickets and then it was into the terminal for our flight to Tohoku. This was my first experience flying domestic in Japan and I was surprised when we didn't have to remove our shoes or take out our laptops at the security checkpoint. The plane ride to Hanamaki took about 90-minutes and when we got there, we boarded a bus for a 2-hour ride to Rikuzentakata. We had a bento lunch at Kawa no Eki and then one group visited Yokota Elementary School while the other visited Yahagi Elementary School. I went with the Yokota group and the school was within

walking distance from where we had lunch. Once we got to the school, things went by pretty quick as we walked to the gymnasium, sat down and everyone introduced themselves. They played a quick game of rock scissors paper and then got into groups so the participants could share their collages in Japanese. This was something they made before leaving the US showing pictures of their daily lives and also of elementary level students in their communities. Finally, we played two American games introduced by the participants including Simon Says and Heads Up Seven Up. When our time was up, the participants said their good-byes and we headed to a local onsen to bathe and have dinner.

As we drove to Kurasaki Senkyo Onsen, we finally got our first glimpse of the affects of the tsunami as large excavators were separating the debris into large mountainous piles each at least ten feet high. They were nicely organized into different types including metal, wood, tires, and concrete. The entire bus fell silent as we drove through this area and the bus driver was kind enough to share his experiences during the disaster. He was in the area during the earthquake and tsunami. He had to wrap himself with newspaper for several days after the tsunami struck and felt lucky to be alive despite losing everything he had. When we reached the onsen, the mood lightened a bit as everyone was eager to try it out for the first time.

Once everyone finished bathing, we had dinner in the group rooms in the same building with three representatives from Aid Takata, a non profit organization, which was instrumental in setting up activities and finding arrangements for our group in Rikuzentakata. After dinner, we boarded the bus for the hour ride to our hotel in Kesenuma called Hotel Boyo. The hotel is built on high ground and was fortunate to escape the destructive forces of the tsunami. We parked about 50 feet below the hotel and walked up a narrow set of stairs to the top while a small truck took our luggage to the entrance. We were all told to be quiet in respect of all the construction workers, volunteers, and a few displaced families staying at the hotel. The guys shared a large tatami room while the girls were divided up into groups of four and shared smaller tatami rooms.

In the morning, we had breakfast at the hotel and then took the bus back to Rikuzentakata to meet Kon'no Fumiaki, who would meticulously explain to us his research of the tsunami and its affects on his town. He also shared his story of survival during the tsunami when he had to abandon his house to seek refuge at a temple on the top of a large hill. His explanations were very personal as we toured the city starting with the sports center where many people gathered minutes before the tsunami ravaged the town. Sadly, most of them lost their lives because the water went all the way up to the interior ceiling of the building and one of the survivors just happened to be Fumiaki's relative. Next we walked near the coastline where over 20,000 pine trees use to stand, but now there is just one lone pine tree that survived. The most emotional part of the tour was when we visited the old city hall building where Montgomery Dickson worked. There was a memorial setup for all the people who lost their lives in the city and we took a moment to pray. We then drove over to Fumiaki's old neighborhood as he tried to show us the remnants of a historical building they were working to rebuild, but the weather would not cooperate as heavy rain kept us on the bus. To round out the morning, we visited the Light of Hope Monument, which was given to Rikuzentakata by the City of Kobe. The keepers of the park described their fear that the ground wouldn't stop shaking during the earthquake and also gave us a tour of the old-style home, which is well known in the region.

For lunch, we headed back to the temporary city hall building and because there was still no adequate waste disposal in the city, we had to carry our own trash with us and dispose of it back at the hotel. In the afternoon we heard a speech from the Special Advisor to the Mayor Kiyoshi Murakami followed by Mayor Futoshi Toba, who had just taken the position a month before the tsunami hit. He recounts the minutes leading up to the disaster and really doesn't remember how he survived, but he eventually ended up on the roof of the city hall building, which was high enough to evade the tsunami. Afterwards, they bro

Yume chan, the mascot for the city, for a photo opportunity, which brought much joy to the participants. We then headed to the onsen to bathe and then stopped at a small restaurant for dinner on our way back to the hotel. As we were finishing our meals, some of the participants went outside to walk around and saw some kids who turned out to be the in the same class we visited at Yahagi Elementary School. They had an impromptu exchange session in the parking lot behind the restaurant and even the parents came down to see 32 American high school students taking pictures with their kids. I made sure they got the parent's approve before everyone got trigger happy with their cameras.

When we finally returned to the hotel, the owners requested to meet with the students to talk about the disaster. Some of the participants had already gone to sleep, but the ones who were still up gathered in the large tatami room to listen to Eiichi Kato talk about his family's experience during the disaster. At the highest point, the tsunami raised water levels to a point where he could see ships outside the windows of his hotel despite the sea being at least 50 feet below. Not only were there boats and debris floating by, but some of the it was on fire, which frightened many of the people who sought refuge in the hotel. Despite losing their home, the Katos welcomed as many people as they could who escaped the tsunami and was seeking shelter. They said that over 100 people slept in the large tatami room we were using, which currently slept 10. Food and water was scarce and it took several weeks before they received supplies of any kind. Eiichi Kato recalls receiving a crank powered flash light as part of a care package from the US government and said it was really useful following the disaster. After hearing comments from the participants, the Katos only requested that the participants not forget about them and their town and to come back again.

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