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



## 2012 JET MEMORIAL INVITATION PROGRAM REPORT PART 5: US-JAPAN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS SUMMIT IN RIKUZENTAKATA 2012

*by Thomas Lin, Program Officer, JFLA*

Previous Issue: Tohoku Region

They day started with breakfast and we had another beautiful set meal at the Boyo Hotel and afterwards, we packed our bags as it was our last day in Kesenuma. The owner and his wife came out to see us off and also took a few last photos before leaving. We were joined by a guide from the local tourism organization and three volunteers including Azusa Uchikura a graduate from the University of Washington, my Alma mater. She was there documenting the aftermath of the tsunami and her goal is to write a story about the people she encountered so they would never be forgotten.

The guide took us around the city and the scenery looked very similar to what we saw in Rikuzentakata, but there were several differences between the two cities. Unlike Rikuzentakata, which was a resort town, Kesenuma was a port town known for their fishing industry. This industry required fuel to run the ships that go out to sea to catch the fish and much of this was stored in containers near the harbor. When the tsunami came, it destroyed the fuel containers causing fuel to get on the floating debris that eventually caught on fire and this horrific scene was broadcast by news stations all over the world. There was much more high ground in the city where people could flee and those who were prepared and had a plan survived while those who didn't or were stuck in traffic didn't. Kesenuma also has a long history of tsunamis so they had some past experience dealing with this sort of natural disaster.

During the tour, we visited the Kyotoku-maru, a 330 ton fishing boat that was carried over half a mile inland and is currently sitting on a major road in the city. The residents are divided on what to do with the ship because some see it as a memorial to the tsunami while others see it as a painful reminder of the disaster. Next, we headed to the fish market which is the main industry in the town. The tour concluded after the fish market as we dropped off the guide and the volunteers and headed to the Rikuzentakata City Hall for the first ever High School Summit.

We arrived at City Hall and while the participants had lunch, the organizers had a meeting to decide how to facilitate the summit. Since we were already organized into eight groups, it was decided that three to four Japanese students would join each group. After the initial pleasantries, the students in each group would have to work together to come up with ideas on the main topic which was "what they can do together for the future." They would then organize their ideas on a poster sheet so they could present their findings to everyone. There was a time limit of one hour where the groups would have to discuss their ideas, create the display and then present their findings in three minute presentations. To make sure both sides talked, they gave the presentations in pairs with one student from each country. The American student would present in Japanese, while the Japanese student would present in English. A facilitator was assigned to each group to guide them along.

After the meeting we went into the large room where the participants were having lunch and explained to them what was going to happen. They were eager to meet their high school counterparts and as the start time approached, more and more people trickled into the room including students, locals, and several reporters there to cover the event. The event started with a speech by Special Advisor to the Mayor Kiyoshi Murakami, who we met the day before. Then a representative from each of the two high school in Rikuzentakata gave their speech in English followed by the JET-MIP representative in Japanese. Finally, it was time to start the summit as the high school students worked together crossing cultural and language barriers to complete a task. I guided group eight with their presentation and once they started talking, the time went by pretty quick. The pace was fast and when time was up, they had created a poster to show their findings. Each group went up one by one to give their presentations about the ideas they came up with for things they can do for the future. There was a common theme between all eight groups of keeping in touch through social media such as Facebook, which reinforced the theme of bridge building, one of the main goals of this program.

At the end of the summit, Murakami made his closing remarks and presented Yume chan folders to the three representatives who gave speeches. The other participants including the Japanese students also received clear folders afterwards. Then the real Yume chan made her grand entrance to greet everyone. Just like the day before, everyone was ecstatic to see the mascot for Rikuzentakata and the photo session started. First the entire group got one picture and then smaller groups got to take pictures. During the commotion, several of the students were interviewed by the media to get their opinions. I acted as an

interpreter for some of the students in case they were not able to understand what the reporter was asking. Several American students were interviewed and the next day, their photos appeared in the local newspaper.

It was then time to leave, but it would only be a temporary goodbye as we were scheduled to meet some of the Japanese students again at a local restaurant later that night. We got in our bus and headed back to Kurosakisenkyo onsen, which was our bathhouse for the entire time we were in Rikuzentakata. There were definitely more people there compared to the previous two days as many volunteers and tourists came to visit during the three day weekend. Since we had an overwhelming number of female participants compared to males, they were divided up into small groups to take a bath. It didn't take much time the third time around and we were in and out fairly quickly.

For dinner, the bus took us to a restaurant near city hall where the chef had prepared a special meal for us consisting primarily of vegetarian dishes. At the end of dinner, the head chef was gracious enough to come out and explain all the dishes we had just consumed and how he modified traditional Japanese dishes so vegetarians were able to enjoy Japanese flavors. Then one of the American participants got her Yukulele that put the group into singing mode. This was followed by an impromptu song by the Japanese group as they belted out a song in Japanese. As it was time to go, nobody wanted to leave after having spent a good part of the day building camaraderie with their Japanese counterparts. But it was getting late and as the students waved goodbye, we left Rikuzentakata for Sendai with a stop in Ofunato.

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