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DOBUTSU SHOGI (LET'S CATCH THE LION!) SCHOOL PROGRAM FOR VERDUGO WOODLAND ELEMENTARY SCHOOL FIRST GRADERS

by Alexander Michaelson (JFLA Program Coordinator)

In full *hakama* regalia, the proud garb of a true Japanese master, Madoka Kitao Sensei visited the Japan Foundation, Los Angeles (JFLA), on April 16, to share her devoted love for shogi in a special workshop for local children, using the bestselling simplified version of the game that she created called *Dōbutsu Shōgi*. In the world of shogi, the beloved Japanese board game similar to chess, only some two hundred individuals can be called true professionals, and among these, a mere fifty people are women, according to Ms. Kitao.

A member of this elite group, she been a regular contributor to the Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK) and the author of multiple shogi books, as well as an active promoter of the game all around the world. To that end, she created *Dōbutsu Shōgi* (known in English as *Let's Catch the Lion!*), an animal-themed version of the game that everyone can enjoy, including children such as the first-graders from Verdugo Woodland Elementary School that came to her workshop at JFLA.

The principles of shogi go beyond the game board, said Ms. Kitao. As these children from Verdugo Woodland's special Japanese-language immersion program learned how to move their pieces, they experienced the satisfaction of cooperation, the power of strategic thinking, and the excitement of competition, as well as the promising usefulness of their Japanese language skill.

Ms. Kitao asked the students to make three promises: first, to always give your opponent a polite greeting before and after the game; second, to think for yourself and make your own moves without consultation; and third, that there are no take-backs—mistakes are opportunities to do better next time. At the end of the workshop, these three golden rules came full circle, as she taught the students that in daily life as well, one should be kind to others, think independently, and learn from mistakes.

In all, 45 students from Verdugo Woodland visited JFLA, filling the auditorium with happy voices. The students all had the chance to participate in the competition and use their Japanese language skills, and they all received JFLA goody bags as well as *Dōbutsu Shōgi* souvenirs. Yet after two hours of displaying powers of concentration and sportsmanship that could rival students twice their age, the first-graders boarded their bus with far more than goodies—they held a newfound appreciation for the universal lessons of shogi, gained from personal experience with a real master.

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