



TOMODACHI NAJAS Grant Program 2015 Dallas-Sendai Young Ambassadors Narrative Summary

Overview

With support from the TOMODACHI NAJAS grant program, the Japan-America Society of Dallas/Fort Worth (JASDFW) organized the **2015 Dallas-Sendai Young Ambassadors**, a one-week exchange program for six high school students from Miyagi prefecture in Tohoku, Japan. The students were accompanied by one chaperone from the Sendai Tourism, Convention and International Association (SenTIA), our partner organization (formerly known as SIRA). The program took place in Dallas/Fort Worth from August 3 to 11, 2015. The Young Ambassadors participated in a variety of cross-cultural group activities and also enjoyed a homestay experience with local families. The purpose of the program is to further friendship between the people of Dallas and Sendai, while cultivating young leaders to become future stewards of the U.S.-Japan relationship.

Background

The cities of Dallas and Sendai became International Friendship Cities in August 1997 and pledged “to work together to promote cultural understanding, educational exchange, and economic relations between our two nations.” Over the past 18 years, the two cities have held a variety of cultural, educational, and sports exchanges. The Dallas-Sendai Young Ambassadors Program was among the first, starting in 1998. Eight trips took place between 1998 and 2009, alternating between cities. However, the Young Ambassadors program was temporarily suspended in 2011 because of the economic impact of the Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami on Sendai. The largest city near the epicenter of the earthquake, Sendai suffered significant flooding, damage, injury, and loss of life. The TOMODACHI NAJAS grants have made it possible for Dallas and Sendai to resurrect and significantly strengthen the Young Ambassadors program over a three-year period (2013-2015).

Selection Process

The 2015 Young Ambassadors were carefully selected and well prepared for their Texas experience. SenTIA publicized the opportunity to all high schools in Sendai. To apply, students were required to submit an application form and an essay describing what they hoped to learn and how they would take advantage of the experience if selected. SenTIA received 81 applications, from which 30 students were selected to participate in group interviews. Based on the interviews, six students were chosen to represent Sendai as Young Ambassadors. The group included four girls and two boys, ages 15 to 17, representing both public and private high schools in Sendai.

Activities and Experiences

Before leaving Sendai, the Young Ambassadors took part in three orientations organized by SenTIA to prepare them for the trip. Once in Dallas, they participated in four days of organized group activities that introduced the culture and history of North Texas and offered opportunities for team-building, leadership development, and cultural exchange. In addition, each Young Ambassador stayed with a local host family and experienced American daily life. The week culminated in a celebratory farewell picnic with JASDFW members, sponsors, host families, and alumni of the Young Ambassadors program. After their return to Sendai, the Young Ambassadors had several opportunities to share their experiences with their communities.

Pre-departure Orientation

Before leaving Japan, the Sendai students were well prepared to become effective ambassadors. They learned about the purpose of the program and the history of the Dallas-Sendai Friendship City relationship. Four Young Ambassadors who visited Dallas in 2013 gave presentations about their experience, and the students practiced English conversation with an American college student who was studying in Japan. Together, the group researched sites they would visit in Dallas and planned presentations and activities for introducing their city and Japanese culture in Dallas.

Day 1: Departure / Arrival

On Monday, August 3, the Young Ambassadors departed Narita International Airport and arrived at Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport. During their layover in Narita, they received VIP treatment from American Airlines and met with representatives from the U.S.-Japan Council, who gave a presentation about the TOMODACHI Initiative. When the group arrived in DFW, eager host families and JASDFW staff gave them a warm welcome. The students all went home with their hosts to relax and get acquainted before an action-packed week.

Day 2: Official Welcome at City Hall & Downtown Dallas

On their first full day in Dallas, the Sendai students participated in activities introducing the City of Dallas and their role as Young Ambassadors. The day began with a photo stop at Pioneer Plaza, a bronze re-creation of the old Shawnee cattle drives that passed through Dallas. Next, they explored urban culture and architecture in the thriving Dallas Arts District. They played “ice-breaker” games and ate lunch in Klyde Warren Park, a city park constructed over a major freeway as part of Dallas’ effort to create urban green spaces. In the afternoon, the group toured the Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza, which chronicles the 1963 assassination and legacy of President John F. Kennedy.

The day culminated in a visit to Dallas City Hall, where Dallas Mayor Pro Tem Monica Alonzo officially welcomed the delegation and proclaimed each member an honorary citizen of the City of Dallas. Student leader Kana Nemoto presented Ms. Alonzo with a letter from the Mayor of Sendai and gave a brief speech thanking the City for its support of Sendai after the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011. After the ceremony, the students took a brief tour of City Hall and learned about city government through a question-and-answer session with two local leaders: John M. Stich, Honorary Consul-General of Japan in Dallas, and Beth Huddleston, Chief of Protocol for the City of Dallas and Executive Vice President of the World Affairs Council of Dallas/Fort Worth.

Day 3: American High School Life & Community Service

Wednesday’s activities gave the Young Ambassadors a chance to experience daily life in Texas and connect with the community. In the morning, the students toured St. Mark’s School of Texas, a well-respected preparatory school for boys in Dallas. The tour was led by three recent graduates who shared their high school experiences with the Sendai teens.

After lunch, the Young Ambassadors visited the Texas Scottish Rite Hospital for Children, a world leader in the treatment of pediatric orthopedic conditions, for a hospital tour and a volunteer experience. There, the students shared Japanese culture through play with 10 to 15 of the hospital’s patients, ranging in age from 6 to 12 years. The students spent an hour in the hospital playroom, and each Sendai student interacted with patients one-on-one. They taught Japanese games, played cross-cultural games like Uno, and learned a few American games as well. Since August is Tanabata season in Sendai, the

Young Ambassadors helped the patients create hand-made decorations inspired by the famous Sendai Tanabata Festival, and together the patients and students decorated a Tanabata tree for the playroom.

Day 4: Western Heritage

Thursday's activities allowed the Young Ambassadors to experience North Texas' native prairie habitat and Western heritage. At the Fort Worth Nature Center and Refuge, they toured a reclaimed prairie and learned about prairie ecosystems and preservation. They also got a rare chance to interact with a herd of American Bison!

Next, the group explored the Fort Worth Stockyards, beginning with lunch at Joe T. Garcia's, a historic Mexican restaurant. Harvey Yamagata, a 2nd generation Japanese, Fort Worth native, and President of the Fort Worth Japanese Society, joined them to share stories and experiences over fajitas. After lunch, the students toured the Stockyards, enjoying a chance to shop, explore the cattle pens, visit Fort Worth's herd of Texas longhorn cattle, and meet some real cowboys.

Day 5: University of Texas at Dallas & George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum

The activities on Friday provided opportunities for the Young Ambassadors to reflect on their experiences and consider future possibilities. The day began with a tour of the University of Texas at Dallas (UTD) with students and faculty, offering a glimpse of post-secondary education in the U.S. After the tour, the Sendai students participated in a "dialogue circle" discussion designed to deepen their understanding of their experiences in Texas. Approximately 30 people participated, including host family members, JASDFW board members, UTD students and faculty, and both current and former Young Ambassadors. Participants were divided into three groups with members who varied in age, experience, nationality, and ethnicity. In each group, a JASDFW staff member or volunteer moderated a discussion about cultural perceptions and impressions, assisted by the Young Ambassadors and an interpreter. At the end of the discussion, each Young Ambassador reported his or her reflections on the discussion to the larger group. Before leaving campus, the students got a taste of school spirit, dressing in UTD colors for spirit day at the student cafeteria.

In the afternoon, the group visited the George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum for a special briefing about the U.S. Presidency, a museum tour, and a question-and-answer session in a replica of the White House Situation Room.

Days 6 & 7: Activities with Host Families

A key part of the Young Ambassadors program is the homestay experience, which allows for an "organic" cultural exchange experience. Students spent evenings and the weekend with their host families, experiencing American daily life and special outings with family and friends. Activities included Texas Rangers games, the Mesquite Championship Rodeo, backyard barbecues, swimming, cooking, shopping, and musical jam sessions. Many of the Sendai students cooked Japanese meals for their host families.

Day 7: Farewell Party

The week culminated in a Sōbetsukai (farewell party) on Sunday evening at Flag Pole Hill Park in Dallas. The party was attended by approximately 70 JASDFW members, volunteers, host families, board members, and executives of TOMODACHI sponsors Toyota and Hitachi. Several Young Ambassadors from 2013 and 2014 also participated, building on friendships developed in the previous two years. The spread was a blend of Texas barbecue and potluck dishes prepared by students and their families. The atmosphere was truly multicultural, with many host families in yukata and jinbeh, and many Japanese

sporting cowboy hats and boots. The Young Ambassadors gave presentations about Sendai culture, including the city's famous Tanabata celebration, and helped guests create Japanese crafts and Tanabata decorations. Finally, the Sendai students led the entire audience in a traditional Japanese dance, closing out a memorable evening.

Days 8 & 9: Departure

On Monday morning, many tears were shed as students and hosts made their final farewells at the airport. American Airlines representatives were on hand to greet the students and escort them through check-in and security clearance. It was clear that both students and hosts had been deeply affected by the week's experience and formed lasting bonds of friendship.

Post-trip Activities

Following their return to Sendai, the Young Ambassadors shared their experiences with the community in several ways. On August 23, the students gave a presentation to their parents, 2013 alumni, and Sendai City Hall representatives. Additionally, Kana Nemoto spoke about her experience to her school's entire second-year class and their teachers (approximately 330 people), and an article detailing her experience was posted to her school's website. (*See Part E. Media Coverage.*) Subsequently, the Sendai delegation got together to record their experiences for SenTIA's radio program and to prepare content for a final report book.

In Dallas, the Japan-America Society gave a complimentary one-year membership to each host family. Several host family members and former Young Ambassadors participated in the third annual Japan-America Friendship Night with the Texas Rangers in August, and others volunteered at JASDFW events in September and October.

Goals and Strategies

The Japan-America Society has three primary goals for the Dallas-Sendai Young Ambassadors program:

- To further mutual understanding and ongoing engagement between Japanese and Americans (our mission)
- To cultivate future stewards of the U.S.-Japan relationship
- To strengthen the Dallas-Sendai Friendship City relationship

In addition, we strive to improve and refine the program continually from year to year based on what we learn from each experience.

Outcome/Accomplishments

Key strategies this year were (1) to improve the quality of interaction between the Japanese students and American teenagers; (2) to add leadership development activities, a priority of the TOMODACHI Initiative; and (3) to expose new people and organizations to the Dallas-Sendai relationship. We also extended the program by one day to offer the Young Ambassadors a more in-depth experience.

Better Interaction between Japanese and American Youth

This year, we started host family recruitment earlier and were able to choose families with teenagers close in age to the Sendai students. These American "host siblings" accompanied the Young Ambassadors all week and participated in their group activities. In 2013, we observed that the Japanese students were hesitant to mix with the Americans and vice versa, and this trend proved true again this year. However, we dedicated more time to ice-breaker games on the first day and incorporated several quizzes and games throughout the week. We also made a concerted effort to intermix Japanese and

Americans at meals and on the bus. Especially helpful in this effort was Neyva Hernandez, a 2014 Young Ambassador from Dallas who joined the group each day. Her age coupled with her experience made it easy for her to draw out both the American and Japanese students and smooth over any awkwardness between them.

By Thursday, there was a marked difference in group dynamics on the long bus ride to Fort Worth. The Japanese students were outgoing, joking and playing games with the Americans. They led quizzes on the bus, spurring the Americans to invent Texas trivia games. On the way home, the Americans passed out novelty candies like Red Hots and Pop Rocks, and everyone had a good chuckle as the Japanese students tried not to make faces. By Friday morning, all of the Young Ambassadors were friends with the American teens on both Facebook and Line.

New Leadership Development Activities

The Young Ambassadors were given a variety of leadership assignments and opportunities over the course of the week. Early in the week, leadership activities were very structured. For example, before they interviewed local government officials John Stich and Beth Huddleston, they prepared questions in advance, and each student took a turn asking a question. Each student also had a prepared role in the official ceremony, where they presented gifts to Ms. Alonzo and Kana Nemoto delivered a brief speech. As the week progressed and they became more confident, the Sendai students were able to assume leadership roles spontaneously and required less structure. For example, they had prepared games and crafts for the patients at Scottish Rite Children's Hospital, but quickly learned to adapt their plans to be responsive to the patients' needs.

When the Young Ambassadors met with Fort Worth Japanese Society President Harvey Yamagata on Thursday, they didn't need to rely on scripted interview questions. During the "dialogue circles" on Friday, they were confident in directing questions to participants of diverse nationalities and ages – a task that would have been outside of their comfort zone earlier in the week. The impressions and reflections they shared at the conclusion of the discussion were insightful and sincere, demonstrating a new-found ease speaking to a larger audience. By the time the farewell party arrived, the Young Ambassadors were cool and collected during their presentations to the 70-person audience.

Stronger Ties between Dallas and Sendai

The 2015 program introduced the Dallas-Sendai Friendship City relationship to community members and organizations not previously involved in Dallas-Sendai activities. The 2015 host families were not JASDFW members before, and most had never been to Japan. Now, many of the host families have volunteered at subsequent JASDFW events. Moreover, all the host families expressed an interest in visiting Sendai, and three of the host siblings plan to apply for the 2016 program. UT Dallas, one of JASDFW's strongest partners, had not previously been involved in Dallas-Sendai activities. Similarly, the Texas Scottish Rite Hospital for Children and the Fort Worth Nature Center and Refuge were introduced to Sendai for the first time by the Young Ambassadors.

To reinforce existing bonds between people in Dallas and Sendai, we invited previous Young Ambassadors to join this year's program. Young Ambassador Sameer Khoja (2014) shared the hosting opportunity with his cousin, Zain Khoja. Zain's family hosted a Sendai student this year, and now Zain hopes to become a Young Ambassador next summer. Four other alumni got to know the Sendai students at the farewell party: Pauleen Speegle (2014), Myra Ramdenbourg (2014), Neyva Hernandez (2014), and Kotaru Obara of Sendai (2013), who came to Dallas to visit his 2013 host family. As described above, Neyva volunteered all week, remembering how much it meant to her last summer when the

2013 Young Ambassadors befriended her group from Dallas. The program offered opportunities for these alumni to reaffirm their identities as Young Ambassadors and appreciate their ongoing role in U.S.-Japan relations.

Sustaining the Program

The grants received through the TOMODACHI NAJAS program in 2013-2015 made it possible not only to resurrect a dormant program, but also to improve its quality. The benefits of repeating the program annually, rather than every three to four years, are significant. With increased public awareness, the number of applicants has increased each year in both Dallas and Sendai. Additionally, any interested high school student will have the opportunity to apply during his/her high school career. Finally, with an annual program, there is more likely to be direct reciprocal exchange between hosts and program alumni. In both 2014 and 2015, alumni in the host city welcomed the new Young Ambassadors, and alumni have also played a role in preparing students for their trip abroad.

JASDFW and SenTIA are committed to continuing the Young Ambassadors program annually if resources allow. We have agreed to hold the Dallas-Sendai Young Ambassadors program in summer 2016 with a Dallas delegation to Sendai, funded by student participation fees if necessary.

Significance to JASDFW

The Dallas-Sendai Young Ambassadors program is a mission-driven program that truly “furthers mutual understanding and ongoing engagement between Japanese and Americans.” It supports a major JASDFW goal – to provide opportunities for people in North Texas to experience U.S.-Japan cross-cultural exchange. The program also addresses our goal to deepen and broaden the Dallas-Sendai relationship beyond JASDFW to other individuals and organizations. Moreover, the Young Ambassadors program instills in young people an interest in the U.S.-Japan relationship and encourages study abroad. The critical need to cultivate future leaders of the U.S.-Japan relationship has been strongly voiced at both national and international gatherings of Japan-America Societies in recent years.

Partner Organizations

Dallas-Sendai Young Ambassadors 2014 is part of the TOMODACHI NAJAS Exchange Program, which is made possible through generous contributions from Mitsubishi Corporation, Toyota Motor Corporation, and Hitachi, Ltd.

The program was organized and administered in Dallas by the Japan-America Society of Dallas/Fort Worth (JASDFW). On behalf of the host city, JASDFW made international travel arrangements; planned the itinerary, group activities, local ground transportation, and meals; recruited and coordinated host families; administered the grant; and managed the budget.

In Sendai, the program was managed by the Sendai Tourism, Convention and International Association (SenTIA), formerly the Sendai International Relations Association (SIRA). On behalf of the visiting city, SenTIA recruited and selected participants, provided training and orientation, made domestic travel arrangements in Japan, provided a chaperone, and managed Sendai’s budget.

The City of Dallas’ Protocol Office, which is managed contractually by the World Affairs Council of Dallas/Fort Worth, has official responsibility for city-to-city relationships. WAC staff organized the official welcome at City Hall by Deputy Mayor Pro Tem Alonzo and the Sixth Floor Museum visit.

The UT Dallas Asia Center was a significant partner this year, arranging for the campus tour, lunch in the student cafeteria, and a classroom for the dialogue circles.

American Airlines, headquartered in Fort Worth, and an important partner of JASDFW, provided valuable assistance to the group at both DFW and Narita International Airports.

In addition to the seven host families, 13 volunteers – both Japanese and American – served as chaperones, photographers, interpreters, and assistants during the week.

Attachment: Program Itinerary