

Student Testimonials

Japan America Society of St. Louis

George Arbanas (Age 15)



Even as recently as six months ago, I couldn't imagine myself taking part in a program like TOMODACHI. Ever since I can remember I've wanted to travel to Japan, but I always assumed I would make the journey sometime after high school, possibly during a GAP year or something along those lines. But this opportunity caught me by surprise (in a good way), and I immediately jumped at the opportunity. Being accepted was a dream come true, and I couldn't wait to get started. We did a lot of preparation for the trip, but one of the most impactful parts of the preparation was watching some documentaries about the tsunami, specifically in Ishinomaki.

Traveling to Ishinomaki, however, was an enlightening and collectively different experience.

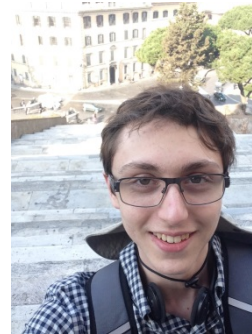
The people, however, did not have the look of disaster on their faces. Even at the visit to the Mayor's office, where we heard some of the reports of the progress that had been made in the past three years, everyone seemed optimistic. This optimism was one of the biggest things I noticed about the people in Ishinomaki. Everyone we met was trying their best to do their part to help life go on normally. Just like the field where the houses were, where the grass began to grow, it seems like the spirit of Ishinomaki had been reborn, and the people were moving on.

Of course, our entire trip wasn't serious all the time, and the more lighthearted experiences were with the many friends we met in Ishinomaki. From playing hand games, magic tricks, to messing around in a photo booth in a mall, it occurred to me that my new Japanese friends aren't all that different from my American friends. We all really enjoyed each other's company, and aside from cultural differences, we were all very much interested in the same things. While certainly there were cultural and language barriers to overcome, it seemed like teenagers in Japan, like teenagers in America, quite simply love to have a good time.

Saying goodbye was the hardest part of the trip. I had made some amazing friends in Ishinomaki, and together we had experienced things that were both tragic and wonderful. Because of this trip, I had invested myself in Japan and its wonderful culture-this was indeed no vacation. Not only have I traveled to Japan, I've formed bonds that will last a lifetime. As Dr. Usui told me at the end of the trip, "This is only the beginning." And I believe it is. We have a lot of work ahead of us as a program, but I have been inspired by the spirit of what I have experienced over the past ten days to do whatever I can to continue my part in TOMODACHI.

Joshua Kazdan (age 16)

We saw evidence of people recovering from adversity. Some struggles are physical, like rebuilding homes and offices. But for many, the loss is not merely physical. The ocean, which is a source of life for Ishinomaki's economy, has also demonstrated its volatile power.



It will take more than just a few years for people to feel safe again in their homes. But for now, I think that they can only heed the mayor's advice - to remain unified. And, there is much hope in Ishinomaki. People remember the earthquake. There are shrines on nearly every street corner. Some houses remain standing as reminders of what has transpired. But new construction has also occurred, and I think that a plywood sign in the middle of one of those fields, on the site of a demolished convenience store says it all. "Persevere, Ishinomaki."

This trip was truly an once-in-a-lifetime experience and I thank that we all formed enduring connections with the country and its people. I learned an incredible amount about Japanese culture, and I have come to further admire and respect it. I will continue to be involved with the Japan America Society. I look forward to learning even more about Japan.

Finally, I realized how much the Tomodachi program means to the residents of Ishinomaki. As we left on the fourth day, many wept, imploring us to come back soon. We were a reminder of America's commitment to friendship with Japan, and a reminder that Ishinomaki in its hardship is not forgotten. I hope that I will have the opportunity to return soon.

Angelena McMurray (Age 13)

I now know that there is a much bigger world out there and how similar and different cultures can be. I also have discovered that in the most serious times everyone unites to survive. I've noticed that everyone is much happier now. During the time of the devastation everyone had been torn apart, and I think that they had to get out of the state of shock which was difficult for them. I have truly seen how heartbreaking this has been for many people. I may not have felt the pain of some but I know how they feel and I'm glad everyone has moved on without forgetting about this major event. This has also motivated me to learn more languages and to interact with different people. I used to look at disasters and think, "Wow that must be hard for them." Now that I have seen this up close and in person, I know that I should consider how people feel and see what they've been through. I will continue to interact with Japan, and I will use this experience to help me with decisions in my life. I now feel as though I should help the world in any way I can. I am so grateful for this chance and I will continue to help the world and Japan into rising up to become a better world. I thank you for this opportunity to make a difference and create something new.



Camille Mussman (age 13)

I have a whole new outlook on the world and its diversities. I knew that we would learn and see a lot. I knew we would meet a lot of people. What I didn't know was how close we would get to those people. Our days were long and full of nonstop driving and visits. We went to the Ishinomaki fishing district, where we got to take a boat ride out in the ocean to a place that had scallops in nets that they had growing out there for almost 2 years! We also visited the seaweed factory there and watched the worker freeze dry the packages of seaweed so that no air remained in them. Okawa elementary school was very sad and hard to see. At the Ganbaro shrine by Okawa elementary school, we each took turns in rows of two bowing our heads and praying for those who perished in the tsunami. We climbed the 200+ steep steps leading up the mountains as a safe route behind the school (Kadonowaki elementary school). They were uneven, steep steps, and I can imagine how hard this must have been for the younger kids escaping to safety. At the top was a beautiful, red Buddhist temple. We visited a children's center, which was really fun. All of the students there tried communicating to us with their English, which was pretty good! They asked us some questions like, 'What's your favorite color?' and 'What's your favorite animal?' I didn't want to have to say goodbye to them. Someday I am going to return to Ishinomaki to see our Japanese friends. I can't express my gratitude enough to TOMODACHI for giving us this opportunity and to Japan America Society for taking the time and money to prepare us for the trip with meetings and lessons.



Robert B. Smith (age 16)



This trip, in my opinion, has profoundly changed me. I have learned so much from the Japanese people about humility, generosity, and strength in the face of adversity. It has opened doors to me in ways I never thought possible, and left me with a richer understanding of the world and our place in it. My single regret is that the trip lasted only a week. Despite all that I learned, I feel that Japan has a lot left to teach. I am eternally grateful to have had such an experience, and I cannot wait to use what I have learned to expand the horizons of others and make a real difference in the world. Hopefully, I can also someday find my way back to Japan, and continue to learn and grow in such a marvelous country.

Rachel Wagner-Muns (age 16)

The trip to Ishinomaki, Japan was an incredible experience for me. When we reached Ishinomaki, we were greeted by two students and a handful of adults who had participated in the program coming to St. Louis the year before. I was acting pretty shy and withdrawn at first, but I began easing into speaking Japanese almost as much as I spoke English.



One of the things we did while visiting areas around Ishinomaki that really stuck out to me was visiting the Sanriku Kozakana Net, and helping clean up the now-empty lots and fields that had once held houses before the tsunami struck. Seeing people from all sorts of backgrounds and ages coming together and helping to try and make the area livable again, and hearing just how often they did it (even the little kids, who thought of it almost like playing) really showed me how the Japanese people as a whole are working to overcome the challenges faced after the earthquake and tsunami. The way that the groups grew from one family to eventually the whole area showed me how a lot of the people in Japan are coming together to try and rebuild, even though small efforts. Another place that stands out in my memory was the children's center. On the walls were pictures, starting from right after the tsunami to several months later, November of the same year. Right after the tsunami, the pictures were very abstract and shaky, with very few recognizable shapes. However, as time went on, lines grew steadier, kanji (most often 命, life) appeared, and ideas and hopes for a better future appeared on the papers around the room. All the children worked together and created what they thought should be rebuilt there. Even the youngest child, who I believe was four or five years old, created a statue that would glow with rainbow light to encourage people to move on. The dreams for the future by these children, who had talked to city planners and officials, showed the hopeful city they wanted to see once again.

This resilience of the people and will to move on without forgetting the past was prominent in everywhere we went. The resilience of the people of Ishinomaki especially is something everyone could use a little of, whether they're facing a natural disaster or struggling through the daily push and shove of work. I want to share all these things I've learned with my friends and family.