



TOMODACHI NAJAS Grant Program 2019 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 2019 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 two chaperones from the Sendai Tourism, Convention and International Association (SenTIA), our partner organization.

The program took place in the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex from August 7 to 15, 2019. The Young Ambassadors participated in a variety of cross-cultural group activities and 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.” The Dallas-Sendai Young Ambassadors program was started in 1998 and was among the first exchange programs created. However, the program was temporarily suspended in 2011 because of the economic impact of the Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami on Sendai, which suffered significant flooding, damage, injury, and loss of life. The TOMODACHI NAJAS grants made it possible to resurrect and significantly strengthen the Young Ambassadors program over a seven-year period (2013-2019).

Goals

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 (JASDFW 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. Key strategies in 2019 were (1) to create more meaningful interaction between Sendai and Dallas teenagers, (2) to be a part of the community by volunteering, and (3) to understand the cultural context by communicating and living with the host families.

Selection Process

The 2019 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 79 applications this year. After interviews, six students were chosen to represent Sendai as Young Ambassadors. The group included four girls and two boys, ages 15 to 18, representing six high schools in Sendai.

Before leaving Japan, the Sendai students met three times and prepared to become effective ambassadors. They learned about the purpose of the program and the history of the Dallas-Sendai Friendship City relationship. Together, the group researched local sites they would visit and planned presentations and activities in an effort to introduce their city and Japanese culture.

Experience in Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex

Leadership Opportunities

Each student had opportunities to represent the delegation at key meetings through group introductions, leading presentations, and presenting gifts and thanks. Students were able to meet with community and business leaders and interact with them through question and answer sessions.

Team-Building

By preparing for group presentations and activities, designing program t-shirt, or just traveling with others, the theme of the week was on team building. The Young Ambassadors did not know each other prior to the program. They all attend different schools and are at different grade levels. They quickly learned to work together in achieving their goals. Throughout the program, they were able to build trust in one another, improve communication skills, and inspire each other.

Homestay

A key part of the Young Ambassadors program is the homestay experience, which allows for an “organic” cultural exchange. The Young Ambassadors spent their evenings and weekend with their host families, where they experienced American daily life and special outings with family and friends. Activities included attending a baseball game, visiting local museums, going to church, and trying local Texas cuisine (BBQ). The experience taught the importance of sharing and understanding one another’s cultures. Many of the Young Ambassadors brought some Japanese food from Sendai and cooked traditional meals for their host families. While it was just a week, each student made lifelong friendships with his or her host family. It was amazing to see how deeply connected they became despite language barriers.

Learning about Dallas area

To learn more about Dallas and North Texas culture, the Young Ambassadors visited Denton Square, the Fort Worth Stockyards, Downtown Dallas, the Legacy West complex in Plano, Dallas City Hall, the Texas Rangers Baseball Club’s Globe Life Park, and the Sixth Floor Museum, which tells the story of the tragic assassination of U.S. President John F. Kennedy.

Volunteer Experience at the North Texas Food Bank

Volunteer at the North Texas Food Bank was a rare opportunity for all the students. The magnitude of the event, defined by the space, amount of donated food, and the large number of volunteers that

participated. The students helped sorting food for 1.5 hours, total of 4,000 meals. They also enjoyed a lecture about the North Texas Food Bank and a facility tour by one of veteran volunteers. It was an experience one could not obtain in Japan and conveyed the value of giving back.

High School Visits

The Young Ambassadors had opportunities to see distinctly unique high schools during the program. The first high school they visited was Koan School, a private school with less than 40 students in a rural area of the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex. The second high school was Crowley High School, a large public school with more than 2,000 students near Fort Worth. They were able to interact with local students at both schools; gave a presentation of Japanese school life, introduced Sendai City, and tested students' knowledge through interactive quizzes. Local students were very happy to learn about Japan and also received some gifts from Sendai.

University Visits

The Young Ambassadors were able to visit both the University of North Texas (UNT) and Southern Methodist University (SMU). They enjoyed campus tours and discussions with college students, who had been to Japan earlier in the year with the 2018 Young Ambassadors.

Rayyan Khoja and Grace Chang, two of the 2018 Young Ambassadors, are currently studying at UNT. They kindly agreed to coordinate the campus tour and even showed them around the student dormitory. They educated everyone about the UNT mascot, Scrappy the eagle, and had fun taking pictures while portraying Scrappy's signature pose.

Welcome Party

The party was held at a conference room in TOYOTA stadium on Saturday, August 10. It was attended by 55 of JASDFW members, volunteers, host families, board members, and the runners who visited Sendai in May to represent Dallas in the 2019 Sendai International Half Marathon. The party was just like a Japanese summer festival as all the Young Ambassadors and some of the host families dressed up in yukata and jinbeh. JASDFW prepared surprise gifts for the delegation including Young Ambassadors Program stainless water bottles and books about Texas. The party was followed by the FC Dallas game where everybody enjoyed celebrating a 5-3 victory over Minnesota FC.

Continuing Role as Young Ambassadors

After returning home to Sendai, the students gave a presentation to their parents, alumni and SenTIA staff about their experience in Dallas. Many Young Ambassadors expressed their motivation for studying English more and an interest in coming back to the United States. Some of them even mentioned volunteering in various community services.

Sustaining the Program

The grants received through the TOMODACHI NAJAS program from 2013-2019 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 quality of applicants has increased each year in both Dallas and Sendai. 2017 alumni helped the 2019 Young Ambassadors to prepare their program prior to leaving Japan. A 2018 alumna, Jadyne Rowlett, hosted one of the Young Ambassadors this year and participated in the program with his younger brother Joel Rowlett. Other 2018 alumni, Grace Chang, Rayyan Khoja, and Katherine Sinclair also participated in the program.

JASDFW and SenTIA are committed to continuing the Young Ambassadors program proceeding into 2020. JASDFW is currently looking into several grant opportunities to support the program, in addition to potential funds through the TOMODACHI Initiative.

Partner Organizations

The 2019 Dallas-Sendai Young Ambassadors program is part of the TOMODACHI NAJAS Exchange Program, which is made possible through a grant provided by the TOMODACHI Initiative to the National Association of Japan-America Societies. The TOMODACHI/NAJAS grants have enabled JASDFW and Sendai to build a strong and sustainable partnership over the course of this exchange program. The grants have been important to JASDFW's efforts to raise additional funds to support this program and make it free for all participants. JASDFW deeply appreciates the support of TOMODACHI Initiative and NAJAS for the Young Ambassadors program.

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). On behalf of the visiting city, SenTIA recruited and selected participants, provided training and orientation, made domestic travel arrangements in Japan, provided chaperones, and managed Sendai's budget.

The City of Dallas' Protocol Office, which is managed through a contract with the World Affairs Council of Dallas/Fort Worth (WAC), has official responsibility for city-to-city relationships. WAC staff members organized the official welcome at City Hall by Deputy Mayor Pro Tem Adam McGough and the Sixth Floor Museum visit.

American Airlines and Japan Airlines, important partners and official members of JASDFW, provided valuable assistance to the group at both DFW and Narita International Airports. JASDFW board member, Kyoko Vivas from Japan Airlines, participated in the welcome party and prepared special JAL goodies for the Young Ambassadors.

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

Attachment: Final Program Itinerary