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Japanese students build foundation of leadership



Brant Ward, The Chronicle

Students attend a community and housing class offered through the Tomodachi leadership institute at UC Berkeley.

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Chisato Kawamura, 17, lost her father, her home and many of her friends in Iwate, Japan, in the Japanese earthquake and tsunami of 2011. In the years since, she has watched students like herself accept help through scholarships and seen families - including her own - become dependent on aid from the Japanese government.

Chisato says she appreciates the help her family has received, but her experience has her aiming for more: contributing to the revitalization of her community. She hopes to give back to her home region using skills she's acquiring while participating in the Tomodachi Summer 2013 SoftBank Leadership Program in Berkeley this summer.

"She feels like she's not doing anything by herself, so in return she wanted to take action and do something so she can show her thankful feeling to the people who have been helping her and her community," SoftBank spokeswoman Mariko Osada said, translating for Kawamura.

SoftBank, a Tokyo Internet company and cell phone carrier, is sponsoring its second summer leadership program, bringing 100 Japanese high school students from the devastated region of Tohoku to UC Berkeley for three weeks this summer.

Coming from the disaster-affected prefectures of Iwate, Miyagi and Fukushima, the students are taking leadership classes, working with Berkeley Mayor Tom Bates on plans to revitalize Telegraph Avenue, and acquiring development skills that will help them contribute to their communities when they return home.

"We didn't want our support to be a one-time thing," Osada said. "Our CEO is really famous as a big entrepreneur. He has strong leadership skills. We wanted to have the students to have the same leadership skills."



Transformative experience

SoftBank Chief Executive Masayoshi Son placed the program at UC Berkeley because he had a transformative experience studying there for three weeks when he was 16.

"If I had not experienced America then, my life would have turned out completely differently," Son said at an event starting the program last year. "That is where I found hope."

Berkeley also worked well for the program because the school already had a regional development program in place.



Brant Ward, The Chronicle

Rie Tsuruoka shows a picture on her tablet of her grandmother's house before the 2011 quake.

SoftBank is among 65 companies participating in the Tomodachi Initiative, a public-private partnership developed by the United States and Japan. Tomodachi works with Japanese and American companies to encourage and strengthen cultural and economic ties between the next generations in both countries. Softbank is among 13 strategic partners of the initiative, meaning the company has donated more than \$1 million to develop a program of its own.

"The Tomodachi SoftBank summer leadership program is a unique program that allows students to really home in on their leadership skills and create long-lasting friendships," said Saki Takasu, development director at the U.S. Japan Council, a nonprofit started in 2012 to support the Tomodachi Initiative.

Opportunity for innovation

Through a curriculum coordinated by Ayusa, a San Francisco exchange program, and developed by Y-Plan, a Berkeley youth leadership program, students have taken classes in transportation, school and services, housing, and public spaces.

"They're actually making recommendations to Mayor Bates on how to improve Berkeley," said Deborah McKoy, Y-Plan founder and executive director of the Center for Cities and Schools at UC Berkeley. "They have opportunities to be real innovators, social innovators and business innovators."

One student from last year's summer program, Haruna Shiraiwa, has since contributed to her hometown of Iwaki by bolstering Fukushima's tourist economy. She coordinated with Japanese travel agency H.I.S. Co. to lead tours of the area.

Creating change

Program alumna Miku Onodera organized a "candlelight night" for children who had lost their playgrounds because of the building of temporary housing. All proceeds went to her hometown.



Brant Ward, The Chronicle

Mariko Osada, spokeswoman for SoftBank, attends an urban design class at UC Berkeley through the leadership program.

"Continuing is the key, and we want those kids to have strong leadership and a sense of community service," Osada said. "We want them to be the ones to create change and make something happen in Tohoku."

Kawamura has enjoyed the wall art and decorated traffic lights she's seen while exploring Telegraph Avenue. She hopes to brighten up Iwate when she returns by adding color to the damaged prefecture. Ultimately, she hopes to become a nutritionist.

"When she experienced evacuated life, there were still people who cared about what people ate," Osada said in her translation. "She wants to do that in the future."

For now, Kawamura is sampling some of the nutritious - and not-so-nutritious - offerings in foodie capital Berkeley. Her favorite item in this foreign place: potatoes, including but not limited to french fries.

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